



THE MORRIGAN

Celtic Goddess of Magick and Might

COURTNEY WEBER

PRAISE FOR *THE MORRIGAN*

“Courtney Weber's new book, *The Morrigan*, adds much to the experiential material available on the Morrigan. The book is full of personal stories, interesting interpretations of the Morrigan's mythology, and methods to connect to her. It will certainly appeal to many of the goddess's followers today.”

—**Morgan Daimler**, author of
Pagan Portals—The Morrigan and Fairies

“Within the pages of *The Morrigan*, Ms. Weber has masterfully blended history, mythology, spell work, and personal anecdotes into a book that beautifully explores the depth and breadth of The Great Queen and her associated goddesses. A must for neophyte to adept worshiper.”

—**Amy Blackthorn**, priestess of the Morrigan and author of
Blackthorn's Botanical Magic and *Sacred Smoke*

“At what point does a book go from being academic to being one of prose? Courtney Weber does it here with *The Morrigan*, one of the most exhilarating books to come out on one of the most complicated goddesses of the Celtic Realm. Inspiring, thought-provoking, and a must-read for anyone interested in this central goddess of European myth.”

Janet Farrar and Gavin Bone, authors of *Lifting the Veil*

“Magick can arise from many things, but often the most profound magick comes from the places where raw emotions, life truths, heart illusions, and paradoxes meet. Courtney Weber's *The Morrigan* is genuinely personal yet universal in outlook, otherworldly, yet grounded, and filled with a terrible beauty. In other words, it is a true and faithful account of a journey there and back again to the realm of the Phantom Queen. The book is part scholarship, practical advice, personal sharing, tears, and humor, but most importantly it never forgets the reader is a companion on this journey. If you feel

the Morrigan is waiting at the edges of your life, this book will serve you well.”

—**Ivo Dominguez Jr.**, author of
Keys to Perception and *Spirit Speak*

“Courtney Weber blends a powerful mix of history, myth, magick, and personal journey with the Lady of Many Guises. Let her book help you answer the call of the Great Queen.”

—**Christopher Penczak**, cofounder of the
Temple of Witchcraft and author of
Feast of the Morrighan and *The Mighty Dead*

“This well-crafted honoring of the Morrigan warmed my Celtic soul. Educational through excellent research of the ancient texts, practical with ritual, prayer, and spells, it brings alive this great Irish Goddess and her myths and legends in a contemporary way that is understandable and crucially relatable. A seminal book indeed—*míle buíochas*, a thousand thanks.”

—**Karen Ward**, coeditor of *Soul Seers*
and author of *Moon Mná*, annual diary-journal

“In *The Morrigan*, Courtney Weber explores one of the most fascinating and complex deities: Ireland's goddess of many names and many faces. Weber provides a cohesive and brilliant book full of solid historical research, personal experience, and practical application with ease and grace, while guiding the reader to connect and create their very own personal practice and relationship with this ancient goddess. Whether you're already a devotee of the Phantom Queen or you've found yourself recently drawn to her call, this is a book to be cherished.”

—**Mat Aurnyn**, author of *Psychic Witch*

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*For Judy and Margot:
great queens in this world, and the next.*

*There are rough places yonder
Where the men cut off the Mast of Macha;
Where they drive young calves into the fold;
Where the raven-women instigate battle.*

—Dub Ruis

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FOREWORD

I was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar when I met Courtney Weber . . . nah, just kidding! But by that line you will understand that to work with the Morrigan as directly as I have, for as long as I have, you need a bloody good sense of humor. And sometimes it fails you, as it did with this terrible opening joke. So, let's begin again.

I was working as the manager of the Rathcroghan Visitor Centre—then called the Cruachan Aí Heritage Centre—in the medieval village of Tulsk, County Roscommon, when I met Courtney.

Being the general manager of an internationally important archaeological and mythological complex of sites is not an easy job, especially when it seemed you were one of the few in the region who placed a high value and esteem on the sites. Around the time I met Courtney, I had a lot of balls in the air, just trying to keep the doors open and the lights on and the local people happy, never mind my nefarious plans for world domination.

A long, long time ago—in 2002, to be exact—I moved to Roscommon and began to develop relationships with some of the sites and many of the spirits within the Rathcroghan complex. In the lore, Rathcroghan is recorded as being the location of one of the three great fairs of Ireland, as well as being one of the island's three great heathen burial grounds. It's where our national epic saga—the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (“The Cattle Raid of Cooley”)—started and ended. It's the royal seat of the great Warrior Queen Meadhbh (Maeve) of Connacht.

Most importantly to our story, though, is the entrance to the otherworld, described by medieval scribes as “Ireland's Gate to Hell,” but most often called Uaimh na gCat (“Cave of the Cats”), anglicised to Oweynagat. This is the “fit abode” of the Morrigan, and this is where I (eventually) ended up. Sure, what else would you do when your one-year-old nephew is suddenly taken gravely ill? You too, my friend, would head to a known place of power, to communicate with the gods of your land, and maybe cut a deal. Or maybe you'd sit quietly and pray. I dunno. But in that situation, I

headed underground.

I was hoping for Dian Cécht, to be honest. Or maybe Airmed. She seems nice. I was definitely there for the healing vibes. You probably already know who actually showed up, though, and are thinking, “Well, Lora, what did you expect, going to the Morrigan's cave looking for help?” I just wasn't thinking clearly maybe, and I definitely didn't know then what I know now. I really was just expecting some plain old Tuatha Dé Danann help. But she showed up. And made an offer. Which I negotiated a little (Me working for her for the rest of my natural life? Fine. Me promising her a stake in anyone else's future? Nope. Not mine to give.) and then accepted. A life for a life.

And that, my friends, is how I ended up in Rathcroghan, working for the Morrigan, and shortly after walking entirely unqualified into that management position at the centre.

That's where Courtney steps back in. Folks, she seemed very young and was a devotee of Brigid. I could definitely feel that one's fiery breath rolling all over the poor woman (I have a different perspective on Brigid than many others). But, over in the shadows of the corner, another was watching. I stepped in to speak to the group leader, a friend of mine from way back, and I felt Her, the Queen, step with me—guiding me to sit with the red-haired lass at the middle table. We talked a little and, suffice it to say, I gave her group some time that day.

Now, maybe Courtney wants to tell you of her experiences in Uaimh na gCat that day, or in the days since. And maybe she doesn't. Those aren't my stories to tell. But you'll be lucky if she does. You can learn a lot now from our Courtney; she speaks truth and walks with honor. I'd like to think that way, way back I played some small part in opening the gates to her for finding the wisdom of the west in a dark cave at Cruachan.

That's why I was delighted when she invited me to open this book for ye all—it feels a little like we're spiraling back around but going deeper. I hope you enjoy the journey.

Is mise, le meas,
Lora O'Brien, Éire, 2018

CHAPTER 1

Meeting the Morrigan



"Morrighan" by Alanna Butler Gallagher

She is the spirit of fury and peace, power and destruction, joy and terror. She is warrior, queen, death omen, mother, murderer, lover, spy, conspirator, faery, shape-shifter, healer, and sometimes the living earth itself. A captivating contradiction: a demonic female who both haunts and heals; benevolent in one moment, ghastly the next, and kind the moment after that.

Meet the Morrigan.

When I was a child, I broke a thermometer. Amazed, I chased the shiny pools of mercury around the bathroom floor with my fingers, becoming frustrated when they beaded and blobbed beneath my touch but escaping whatever shape I hoped to create. But after a little while, the mystery of the substance was its fun. Beautiful and fascinating but always slightly out of grasp, the mercury on the bathroom floor mirrors my journey with the Morrigan: an ever-shifting, enigmatic goddess both captivating and terrifying. Some might argue that, like trying to hold liquid mercury, fully grasping the Morrigan is dangerous. But this is where my metaphor ends: mercury is toxic, but the Morrigan is not.

Few goddesses attract as much reverence and notoriety as the Morrigan. Her earliest references describe a shrieking, cursing being who laughs at misery, one sometimes aligned with demons of the Christian hell. Medieval writers and contemporary bloggers alike describe a “treacherous” goddess. Yet, while scrolling social media or sharing mead around festival bonfires, I read and heard stories of how the goddess-with-the-warning-label changed lives for the better. I wondered how a goddess known for terror could also be restorative.

Eventually, I would understand.

To begin, who is the Morrigan?

To the best of our knowledge, the Morrigan originated in Ireland during the Celtic era, which took place from roughly 1000 BCE to 500 CE, give or take a few centuries, depending on the region. Today, the word *Celtic* is nearly synonymous with Ireland; but the Celtic world originally encompassed what are now the British Isles, the Iberian Peninsula, northern Italy, Switzerland, France, southern Poland, and central Turkey.

Far from being a homogeneous culture, the Celtic world was home to a variety of languages, customs, and religious practices. It is sometimes wondered whether Ireland should be included under the Celtic umbrella, its own culture too different from other Celtic countries. Others argue that although Celtic cultures were quite different, similar burial rites and weaponry imply these far-flung communities held key core values.¹ It's beyond the scope of this book to decide the matter, but for the sake of clarity I will use the terms Celts or Celtic when discussing the overall Celtic world of this era, and Irish Celts or Celtic Ireland to describe the Irish people of the time.

To understand any deity, it is best to attempt to know the culture from which they came. Unfortunately, we know very little about the Celts. Most descriptions came from their contemporaries, who likely did not understand the Celts or were wont to sensationalize details about them. To even say we “know” anything about the Celts is an exaggeration; saying “we guess” is more accurate. Strangely enough, the mysteries surrounding the Celts may help us better accept and understand the mysteries around the Morrigan.

Like many things about the Celtic world, the Morrigan's origins are cryptic. Other cultures, such as that of the Roman Empire, carved out specific roles for their gods. The gods of the Celts, however, were shifty and ambiguous. The religion of the Celts is believed to have been based on rituals, omen interpretation, magical spells, and avoidance of unlucky actions; but to date no strong archeological evidence exists for a Morrigan cult. Mythology of the era gives us the best glimpse into the Morrigan, but even this is challenged. The Celts did not keep written texts, preferring to preserve history and myth through oral tradition. Stories of the Morrigan and other Irish deities were preserved through manuscripts penned centuries after Ireland Christianized. Christian authors likely changed aspects of the gods to suit the new religion, or simply altered details they found frightening or unimportant.

The Morrigan may have evolved from a collection of deities from different Irish Celtic tribes. These may have included prehistoric deities, adopted by the Celts from earlier Irish inhabitants. While we may never know the Morrigan's specific origins, we do know that she is primarily an Irish goddess. Myths and effigies of some

Celtic deities can be found across Europe, but the Morrigan is believed to be exclusively tied to Ireland.

Her name offers more clues to her identity. Morgan Daimler writes in *The Morrigan: Meeting the Great Queens* that a difference is revealed through the name's spelling:

- *Morrigan* is Old Irish and likely means “Nightmare Queen.”
- *Mórrígan* and *Mór-Ríoghain* are later Irish versions that likely mean “Great Queen.”
- Other interpretations of her name include “Queen of Phantoms,” “Sea Queen, or “Queen of the Slain.”²

Morrigan may also have been a generic title for a collection of goddesses. The Morrigan is associated with several names: Badb, Macha, Anu, Danu, Nemain, and Fea—all of whom were called the “daughters of Ernmas.”³ Little documentation exists for Ernmas, an obscure deity, although in some translations, *Ernmas* meant “murder.”⁴ It's unclear whether these names referred to different aspects of the Morrigan or described distinctly independent characters. In earlier depictions, the Morrigan is defined as both a demonic flying creature and a member of a specific class of nasty beings.⁵ Despite these descriptions, it is unknown whether the Morrigan was feared by the Irish Celts, given that these writings were authored by Christians many centuries after the Celtic gods had been largely abandoned. Were the scribes of the new religion frightened of a divine female? Was this a misunderstanding of an older culture? Or was the Morrigan a monster both loved and feared by the people who originally knew her?

True to many aspects of the Morrigan, we will never have that answer. However, it's suspected that the Celts' relationship to their gods was not a loving one. Celtic gods were living embodiments of the natural world. Such gods could be benevolent, providing food and favorable weather; but they could also be fickle and violent, causing foul weather, disease, and famine. Worship of the gods was likely rooted in appeasement and distraction: *Keep the gods happy so they will leave us in peace*. If this is true, the Morrigan would not have been uniquely or even especially vile. Any goddess with the power to influence the lives of mortal people would have occasionally been viewed as a fearful entity. Given that her name likely meant some form of queen, we can assume that she was

believed to be greatly influential.

THE GREAT QUEEN OF A DIVINE PEOPLE

The Morrigan is one of the Tuatha Dé Danann (“the people or tribe of the goddess Danu”). The Tuatha Dé’s original role in Celtic Irish faith is unknown. Depending on the tale, they were either gods, demigods, divine people, or a faery race who periodically aided humans for their own interests or amusement.

In the myths, the Tuatha Dé arrived in Ireland on ships from the sky, granting the country great gifts of civilization. The Morrigan and her sisters Badb and Macha were among them. The Tuatha Dé completed the creation of the country before they were conquered by the sons of Mil (or Milesians), whom the myths describe as ancestors of the Celtic Irish. After this defeat, the Tuatha Dé retreated underground into the *sídhe* (pronounced *shee*) mounds, also called faery mounds. The Tuatha Dé may have been an indigenous Irish people, mythologized over the centuries, who were replaced by or assimilated into groups who later arrived in Ireland. The Church generally tolerated preservation of Irish mythology so long as it was disguised as history, so we do not know if the Tuatha Dé were meant to represent flesh-and-blood humans or if they were always considered mythical. Therefore, we do not know if the Morrigan was ever meant to describe a historical queen or if she was always considered a feature of myth.

THE MORRIGAN: ONE GODDESS OR MANY?

Is the Morrigan one goddess? Yes.

Is the Morrigan one of several goddesses, all associated with the Morrigan? Yes.

Is the Morrigan even a goddess at all, or a title for a group of goddesses? Yes and yes.

Welcome to the first great paradox of the Morrigan.

The singular-versus-multiple identity of the Morrigan incites online arguments and leaves would-be devotees scratching their heads. Which one is right? Can the Morrigan be one, or many, or both? Contemporary goddess worship is often divided into “hard” and “soft” polytheism. Hard polytheists are likely to view the

Morrigan as a distinctly singular goddess—the other goddesses associated with the Morrigan (sometimes called the Morrigan sisters) are considered to be strictly separate entities. Soft polytheists might embrace the Morrigan sisters as interchangeable facets of one goddess, just as the facets of a diamond are all part of the same stone. If I had to pick a label, I would call myself a semi-hard polytheist. I approach the Morrigan sisters as individual entities, but sometimes I feel them all as one. It reminds me of my mother and her sisters. The women are very different, but being from the same family, they share strong similarities. At a family gathering, you might find them talking or laughing in such unison, they might as well be one person.

Understanding the Morrigan as a single goddess, several goddesses, or another combination is a personal experience. It's not the intention of this book to prove one over the other, nor should it be. For continuity, I will refer to the sisters as separate entities. Sometimes, the myths are unclear as to whether the Morrigan is singular or a collection and we must make our best guesses. The gods are, and always have been, enigmatic. Seeking to understand is part of human nature, but unraveling this conundrum is unnecessary. From the mystery comes the magick, and back to the mystery it returns. I would rather have mystery and the magick it provides than a solved mystery, leaving a magick-less world.

THE MORRIGAN SISTERS

The goddesses most frequently associated with the Morrigan are Badb, Macha, and Morrighu (aka Morrigan). They are famous for being warlike furies urging combatants to fight. Some writers have argued that the sisters were not so much goddesses as “three sinister and destructive female beings who prophesied carnage and haunted battlefields.”⁶ However, anything in triplicate, such as three sisters, within Celtic mythology signified an exalted status. They could appear as crows, speaking to, inspiring, or contributing to the downfall of great characters and creatures, sometimes through a dark, mysterious language.

The Morrigan sisters were often a unified force, but they each possessed unique powers.

Badb

Badb [Bive], aka Bodb, may come from the Celtic *bodua*, which means “fighting lady.”⁷ Badb signified rage, fury, or violence and was described as both goddess and witch. Badb is known for being “red-mouthed,” a color that the Celts may have associated with death.⁸ She too could appear as a scald crow or carrion crow and was sometimes called Badh Catha, “the scald crow of battle,” as Badb incited confusion within armies and reveled among the slain. She could inspire fear enough to cause insanity.

The names of many Celtic goddesses reflected their relationship to humanity. Badb may have been a generic name for a war goddess, an alternative title for the three sisters (in this case referred to as Morrighu, Macha, and Nemain), a term for a bad faery, or a basic title for a frightening female character who issued prophecies of doom. Badb may be connected to the bean sídhe (banshee), a faery whose appearance portends death. Like the bean sídhe, certain “Badbs” were said to be attached to certain families, appearing as fateful omens in the shape of hooded crows.

While all Morrigan sisters are known for foretelling, Badb's specific prophetic role involves warning of danger to come. She is fierce, but not evil. As a crow, Badb may take a mother-goddess form who, even through bloodshed, was ultimately recovering her progeny, her name possibly used by early authors wishing to stress the most frightening aspects of the Morrigan.⁹

Modern manifestations of Badb may be unnerving, such as a dream of an impending death. They may also be helpful, such as a sudden urge to clutch your bag, only to discover that someone was planning to take your wallet. Badb may be a frightening Morrigan sister, but there is a role for scary goddesses. Sometimes, they're the best ones to walk us through scary times.

Macha

Like Badb, Macha is associated with the crow and is sometimes described as “a fury that riots and revels among the slain.”¹⁰ Often described with red hair, Macha was a triple goddess in her own right, sometimes depicted as one entity with three aspects: prophet, warrior, matriarch. She represented the sovereignty and fertility of Ireland, concerning herself with its welfare. Macha could be

vengeful when wronged. She fought those who underestimated her because of her gender. In several myths, heroes' horses were called "Macha's Mare" or "Horse of Macha," suggesting that these mounts were dedicated to or blessed by her. She lived several different mortal experiences. She triumphed, she lost. She held power, she was brutally used. She experienced death numerous times, reappearing in other myths. Macha is sometimes considered a deified manifestation of the physical earth.¹¹

Macha appeared as a queen of Ireland, under the title of Macha Mong Ruad or Macha Red-Mane.¹² Macha may have been a generic title for a woman of power, a historic queen who legendarily ruled all of Ireland in 377 BCE, a pre-Celtic goddess adopted by the Irish Celts, or a sovereignty goddess of the Irish region of Ulster.¹³

While all three sisters have a potential function in any situation, the difference is in their approach and the energy they bring to said situation. If Morrighu is the drive to move forward, and Badb the warning to pull back, Macha reminds us to observe the immediate for obstacles and opportunities. Of the three, she is the one most experienced with human interactions and is often called upon for navigating hostile situations, helping to restore one's personal sense of power. Just as one must be in right relationship with a horse before riding it, Macha helps us be in right relationship with others—but even more importantly, she helps our relationships with ourselves.

Morrighu (or Morrigan)

Morrighu, or Morrigan, was considered a queen among the gods, living in the *sighi*, the faery palaces of the Tuatha Dé Danann. She was known for inciting battle, strife, and deeds of valor. She was also known for her wisdom, generosity, and prophetic abilities. She summoned kings into battle, strategized with gods, and stood with the slain. Morrighu offered morbid prophecies, cursed when insulted, and showed no mercy upon her enemies. She was also connected with wealth and fertility; and with a generous and hospitable reputation, she was sometimes said to be "even greater than the Great God."¹⁴ Morrighu could appear as a beautiful woman, an ugly hag, or a scald crow. Her hair could be black, red, or gray.

This is the sister who devotees generally, but not always, meet first in their Morrigan journeys. The myths of Morrighu or Morrigan shape the overall understanding of the sisters. She can be sought for strength, particularly when facing opposition. Because of her sexual encounters, she is sometimes sought out for matters of intimacy. Morrighu is the voice and energy of things that begin. She is the great conjuror, of both magick and courage. She is the voice that lifts those who think they cannot go on. She is the spirit of determination and courage.

OTHER NAMES OF THE MORRIGAN

The following goddesses also appear alongside the Morrigan. It is beyond the scope of this book to delve deeply into them, but on your own Morrigan journey you may come across them.

Anu

Anu is sometimes believed to be an alternative name for Morrighu (also sometimes called Ana or Anand). Anu was a goddess of wealth and a mother of the gods, said to have nursed the other deities.¹⁵ She is said to be another daughter of Ernmas.¹⁶ It is through Anu that the Morrigan is sometimes thought to be the wife of the Dagda, the Good God of Plenty.¹⁷

This sister might be approached for assistance with prosperity, healthy partnerships, parenting, and health.

Danu

Sometimes called Dana, Danu is another daughter of Ernmas. In some translations, her name meant “sacred waters,” and many rivers across Europe may have been named for her. The Tuatha Dé were named for her, as she was considered a mother or ancestor of the gods. Danu may have been the name of an earth goddess or a title for the land itself. Danu may be an alternate name for Anu. Danu, Anu, and Ana may have been titles for a regional goddess who grew into a more generalized one as time advanced.¹⁸

Danu may be consulted for help with the land: promoting bountiful gardens or farms, or assisting with favorable weather. Goddesses connected with water can also be sought for healing.

Some traditions argue against consulting regional goddesses, like Danu, from afar. Others argue that the gods move with people and through migration, and deities like Danu find new homes far from their origins. This is another personal choice. A middle ground might be to approach Danu for help with connecting with a local, regional deity.

Nemain

A shadowy early Irish war goddess also represented by a crow, Nemain appeared alongside the Morrigan and Badb as a terrifying battle attendant. Nemain had the profound ability to confound armies to the point that she was said to make even friendly bands slaughter one another.¹⁹ She was the wife or consort of the god Neit, as was Badb, whose identity she may share.²⁰

Like Fea, Nemain might be useful in disarming an opposing force, but caution is again advised. Ancient, mostly unknown goddesses may have destructive elements long lost to modern devotees. This doesn't mean these goddesses should never be approached. Older, lesser known goddesses can be eager to help, as devotion is what keeps them strong.

A seeker curious about either Nemain or Fea might find it useful to sit with either or both goddesses (writing their names on an image printed from the internet and lighting a candle nearby is an easy, effective devotional rite). Take note of how you feel. Strong, powerful feelings may indicate these goddesses can help you in a productive way. Creepy, panicky feelings (beyond the general nerves of working with new forces) are likely a warning against utilizing a deity.

Fea

Called “the hateful,” Fea was known for hovering over fighters, inspiring madness in battle, and reveling over the slain. She was frequently associated with or interchanged with Badb. In some stories, she was known as Nuada, one of the gods of the Tuatha Dé Danann.²¹

Fea might be sought out for channeling anger into action. She might be petitioned for help in thwarting an enemy or oppressor, but caution is advised. The frenzy of battle takes no sides. Using

Fea to, say, thwart a landlord with intent to raise the rent might bring additional chaos. A middle ground might be to invoke Fea against that landlord when chaos is already abundant, such as when eviction is imminent. Inviting a goddess into their natural environment can be a helpful tool for navigating difficult situations.

CONNECTIONS WITH MORGAN LE FAY?

As Christianity took hold in Ireland, many Pagan gods and goddesses found new life as Christian saints or folklore heroes. One example is that of Brigid, the Pagan goddess whose myths remained largely intact when she became St. Brigid. It's been suggested that the Morrigan became Morgan Le Fay, the villainess of Arthurian legend.

Morgan Le Fay was known as a faery enchantress of the mystical island of Avalon. She could shape-shift, heal, and cause strife between powerful people. She is sometimes associated with the raven and the ocean. For these reasons and for the similar name, she is often connected with the Morrigan.

But the associations with the raven and the ocean, and her magickal ability, may not be enough to confirm a connection. Raven imagery is found regularly in Continental reliefs of female deities in British and Continental Celtic mythology and is not unique to the Morrigan. Shape-shifting is also a common ability among European deities. Although the names sound similar, if *Mór-Ríoghain* means "Great Queen," a similar etymology may have produced Morgan Le Fay, supplying the character with a regal title, but not automatically connecting her to the Irish goddess. In addition, the Morrigan is solely Irish, while Morgan Le Fay is English and Welsh. This does not mean that the Irish and British Celts never exchanged any sort of folklore, but the greater likelihood is coincidence and not connection.

Still, many believe, through their personal experiences, that the Morrigan and Morgan Le Fay are one and the same. Again, it is no one's place to label a personal experience as incorrect. But because the two are likely not connected historically, we will lovingly leave Morgan Le Fay here, and not include her as a Morrigan sister or aspect in this book.

WHY THE MORRIGAN? WHY NOW?

The Morrigan was on my personal spiritual periphery for years.

I've visited her sacred sites in Ireland, including several visits to Uaimh na gCat (Oweynagat, "Cave of the Cats"), where the myths say the Morrigan passes into the otherworld. I've honored her in rituals and prayed for her assistance with difficult matters. Still, I held her at a distance, as I'd heard too many warnings: She would take what she wanted from me. I could become ill. I might go insane.

Sometimes, however, circumstances become so fraught we'd rather risk the side effects than avoid the medicine. When I got to that place, I approached the Morrigan.

But what would she do to me?

When I devoted myself to the goddess Brigid, I was a mess. I wanted to be a writer, but I could barely finish a blog post, let alone a book. I averaged three hours of sleep a night, working hard and partying harder. I was furtively dating a married man and hurting anyone who got in my way of getting what I wanted. Brigid entered my life like a sacred bulldozer, annihilating the relationship and exposing false friendships. The changes were hard, but worthwhile. I met my husband. I started a coven. I traveled. I wrote a book called *Brigid: History, Mystery, and Magick of the Celtic Goddess* and another book after that. My life was gentler, more meaningful, and my purpose was clear.

It's different now. *I'm* different now. I did not come to the Morrigan like a young tornado. My life was stable, my relationship solid, my health good. Yet, my soul was ragged. In a single year, I stepped down as high priestess of my coven, so bitterly burned out that I was on the verge of quitting magick and Pagan spirituality completely. My husband and I moved three thousand miles west from New York City to a small town in rural Oregon. I'd hoped to spend the first few months settling into our new home and writing. Instead, I spent most evenings in one of many therapists' offices. An eating disorder I've battled since age twelve flared up, coupled with chronic depression I'd ignored for too long. Most painfully, a two-year journey to heal an infertility issue hit a dead end. I found myself in a place so dark and deep that no one could reach me. That is where I found the Morrigan.

At winter solstice, my husband and I traveled to Trout Lake Abbey, a druid sanctuary in Washington State, with a bottle of whiskey. The ground was thick with snow, the sky clear, and the winter sun setting. The abbey is home to spectacular shrines dedicated to different Celtic deities—including the Morrigan. I approached the Morrigan's shrine tired and heartbroken, but not hopeless. With a glacial volcano bearing witness in the background, I poured the whole bottle out at the Morrigan's feet. In the twilight, the whiskey looked red upon the snow, mimicking the scenes of the wounded warriors on the shrine. I realized I was a wounded warrior, too, but my injuries were of the heart.

Inviting a goddess into a settled life is scarier than inviting one into chaos. How deep would the Morrigan go? Would she pick me apart like a raven on a corpse? What would she take from me? Would I recognize myself afterward? But in offering the whiskey on that cold night, I acknowledged my fears and proceeded anyway. This, I quickly realized, is an unofficial first step in Morrigan devotion.

The Morrigan is many things, but above all she walks between the worlds of tangible and ill defined. A goddess of the river ford, she is the place where the improbable meets the possible. Just as the rushing waters surrounding a great ford are terrifying, so is she (sometimes). But just as she stands in the ford connecting the dangerous with the safe, she crosses the gap between an old and new reality. We will not get through these lives of ours without facing the unknown and risking losing parts of ourselves in the process. Perhaps this is why she is the Queen of Nightmares. Just as bad dreams help us process trauma, stress, or confusing information, the Morrigan helps us navigate that which is beyond our ability to shape, control, or understand.

At the same time, she invites controversy and fervent devotion that border on fanaticism. Heated schools of thought push narrow interpretations of who the Morrigan is and how she should be approached, based on ancient, cryptic descriptions. Because of this, many who desire to know the sisters shy away for fear of approaching them “the wrong way.” I struggled with this myself, initially. But the gods are, and always have been, reflections of human experience. They also grow and evolve as we do. The spirit of the old Celtic world is very much alive in contemporary Ireland,

but no sane person would hop a flight to Galway and expect their bed and breakfast host to greet them with an iron sword and invite them on a cattle raid. Likewise, it makes no sense for modern devotees to cloister Pagan gods in their ancient forms. Like us, they too have grown and changed.

Then again, to best know the gods, it is important to know the history of the people who first honored them—the brutal parts alongside the beautiful. The world was quite different for humans three thousand years ago. The choices they made to aid their survival might make contemporary people uncomfortable. Their gods and myths reflect that, and to sanitize these attributes would be inauthentic. We can't pick and choose truths about the gods and expect to ever know them fully, even if they don't suit most modern sensibilities.

This book is a combination of the old and the new. It explores the oldest myths of the Morrigan, most of which may seem contradictory or even confusing at times. The messages of Celtic myth are often elusive and morally ambiguous. This may be because they were preserved centuries after they were first told by individuals disconnected from the context of the tales' era. Gemma McGowan, Irish witch and priestess, suggests that Irish myths are lessons on what *not* to do—their misadventures designed to warn listeners against the heroes' follies. Even with this helpful lens, there is still a great deal we will never understand about the myths. Throughout the book, we will work together to find our own understandings. I include many different interpretations for the stories with the goal of opening the door to better understanding, but not to declare a “true” meaning for any of them. The stories may have been told for an ancient people several millennia ago, but they still hold answers for today's seekers. Your job is to embrace what makes sense to you in the moment, perhaps returning later to see how a different interpretation rests with you.

The book also includes stories from contemporary people who have experienced the Morrigan. In each tale, the Morrigan has a hand in guiding people through their own personal mysteries and challenges. Some of these voices are native Irish, some are of Irish descent, and some have little or no ancestral link to Ireland at all. The Morrigan casts a wide net, pulling in devotees from all nations and backgrounds, led by an indelible familiarity known by people

in ancient times and now.

This book doesn't only cover lore and history. Each chapter includes a spiritual practice or exercise dedicated to knowing the Morrigan better. The entirety of [chapter 8](#) is focused on just that. While most exercises are accessible for magick or spiritual practitioners of any level, some require visioning techniques that newer practitioners might find challenging. If you find these difficult, I encourage you to be patient with yourself. All of them will eventually bring you deep experiences with the Morrigan, but some might need a few attempts to get the hang of them.

Finally, I ask you to remember that I am an American, and therefore this book's reflections on Irish history, culture, and spirit come from a foreigner's perspective. For some reason, the Morrigan has collected me, as she has collected many others, and entrusted me with the opportunity to write this book. I won't pretend to understand the Morrigan's reasoning, but I can promise to share what I have learned about the sisters with respect, honor, and gratitude to the Irish people who opened their homes and hearts to me in completing this work.

Let's begin.

RITUAL: MEETING THE MORRIGAN

Most mainstream faiths have temples for worship, but human-made temples to the Morrigan are scarce. Most modern devotees must create their own. Instead of seeing this as a restriction, embrace it as an opportunity to create beautiful spaces that reflect a unique spiritual journey. This section is devoted to building a spiritual space for working with the Morrigan.

In a perfect world, we would each have a permanent space dedicated solely to our personal spiritual work. Frequently, this isn't feasible. Living spaces might be too small, or cohabitants might be unsupportive. My current spiritual space is my office, which sometimes doubles as a guest room. This feels luxurious to me, because for many years I squeezed my homemade altar into the corner of the single room I called home. Never fear if you are not able to dedicate a permanent Morrigan space. Many people keep altar materials in a box beneath their bed, pulling them out when it's time to commune with the gods. Many powerful spiritual

workers can't use their homes at all and meet with their gods at a public park. The best kind of spiritual working space is the kind you keep, no matter its shape or permanence.

You may wish to make an altar for the Morrigan. A desk or table set solely with the Morrigan's effigy and used only for Morrigan devotion is ideal but, again, not always feasible. If you cannot create a permanent altar to the Morrigan, simply setting out a picture of her or the sisters and safely tucking it away after a working is perfectly acceptable. I travel often and regularly create makeshift altars in hotel rooms.

Whatever the setting, invite the Morrigan into your life by making an offering to her. It can be simple: a flower (Goddesses appreciate beauty! The Morrigan seems to love receiving flowers from my husband.) or a cup of something, such as coffee, whiskey, tea, wine, or anything you want to share. Celtic culture honored hospitality. Consider offering the Morrigan what you might offer a guest (one friend offers coffee and cookies to her gods, as that's what her mother always offered guests), and she will likely accept graciously. The offering need not be physical, either. Some Morrigan devotees offer their fears, anxiety, pain, joy, creativity, or love. As the Celts were fond of song and poetry, singing or reciting something is another lovely option. Offerings can be of service, too. One woman I interviewed feeds crows as a Morrigan offering. Never underestimate the value of collecting garbage in a natural place.

Once you've made your offering, darken your space as much as possible to evoke the sense of a cave. If you are able, light a single candle. I use battery-operated candles in spaces where having an open flame is not allowed.

Once the candle has been lit, sit in silence for a few moments. If thoughts enter your mind, acknowledge them and allow them to pass; don't follow them. Many spiritual exercises begin with, "When you are ready . . ." but I say, "Begin *just before* you are ready," because we may never truly be ready to accept a deity into our lives. Just as the first lesson in approaching the Morrigan is to acknowledge fear and proceed anyway, the second might be to accept when you're *not* ready and do it anyway.

A suggested invocation:

Bless me, Great Queen, if You will

I come to You with an open heart
I come to You with a willing heart
I come to You with an open mind
I come to You with a patient mind
I bring my honest self
Feast upon my weaknesses
Fortify me when I am wounded
I offer my devotion
I offer my praise
I offer _____ [*Name your offering here. If you're
not sure what to offer, consider "I offer myself in this
moment, for this moment."*]
So that I may know You better.

Sit with the candle for a few minutes. Just before you are ready to end the rite, extinguish the candle. Offer a word of thanks to the Morrigan.

The goal here is not ecstasy (although it can happen!). You're more likely to feel a sense of peace. If you don't feel anything at all, that doesn't mean the rite has failed. Just as it may take time for you to warm to a new person, the same may be true for you and the Morrigan. She might reveal herself to you through a series of dreams or waking moments of synchronicity. Many people describe black birds following them at the start of their Morrigan journeys. Be open to how the Morrigan presents herself to you without expectation or self-judgment. The Morrigan isn't fond of demands, so be patient.

The Morrigan is best not invoked, but invited. Like a queen, she does not come on command, but can be entreated to appear. Working with the Morrigan is truly working *with* the Morrigan. There will always be an exchange of energy of one form or another. But she is not unreasonable, extracting more than she returns. There are times when the exchange is simple, but the return great. There are times when our ask will be modest, but the ask she makes of us will be extreme. The Morrigan is unpredictable and can be demanding, but she is generous too. Make notes, take a breath, have a laugh, and let the experience unfold on its own

terms.

As with all magick and spiritual work, perform your devotions to the Morrigan with reverence, but also with joy.

The Morrigan Knocks

I think she's much maligned. People think of her as a destroyer. One of the first myths that Irish children learn is that she is the crow who sits on the hero's shoulder as he is dying. For me, the Morrigan is so much richer. She is about birth, death, and rebirth. I think where the Morrigan comes in, for me, is in making friends with what needs to go. That can be an old habit, an old way of being; it could be clutter in the house. We have to trust that we can let go and that more will come. The Morrigan tells me when to ditch what I no longer need. She's regal in her queenly state, and that ferocity can be scary, but she shows me how to be in my full power.

I recently experienced an example of her might. I finished a seven-year cycle of study and had just completed a retreat in Wicklow. Normally, I would be the “good girl”—clean first and then relax. But this time I decided to do it in reverse, and went back to the house for a bath. On the way into the house, I noticed scrape marks on the door. While dressing, I heard scratching at the window. A massive crow was trying to get in. Her wings were spread and she was clawing down the window, the mud from her claws streaking the glass. The minute she saw me, she flew away. I immediately thought of the Morrigan. The next day, the same thing happened. This time, the crow had the door handle in her beak, trying to get in. I wondered, *Is she telling me that death is imminent?* And then I realised that I was letting go of years of study, having been so focused on my masters and PhD. It was a sign that I was moving out of it at last.

Shape-shifter; birth, death, rebirth; making space for

the new . . . I'm still sitting with the experience.

—Karen Ward

CHAPTER 2

Oracles and Omens: The Morrigan on the Battlefield



"Morrigan" by Emily Brunner

While I was living in New York City, I had a series of nightmares.

I dreamed I was in Oweynagat, the Cave of the Cats. In waking life, visiting the cave was an exhilarating experience, but in my dream it collapsed and trapped me inside. I pounded on the cold stone walls and screamed for help. I awoke gasping in my bed. When I went back to sleep, I dreamed again of being trapped in the cave. I woke, again gasping for breath. I tried to stay awake, afraid of having the same dream a third time, but I couldn't. The dream returned before I was even fully asleep. This happened several nights in a row. A tarot reader interpreted the dream: "Awake and prepare for battle." I was scared. Would a jilted ex-lover appear at my door? Would there be a terrorist attack? What kind of "battle" was the dream—and the Morrigan—talking about?

A battle did come. But it wasn't the type I expected.

A few weeks later, the Occupy Wall Street movement erupted in New York City, and I was recruited as a protest chaplain. I listened to angry and traumatized people. I broke up fights and lent support to those arrested. I had complicated feelings about the movement, and still do. Outside of the spirited marches, the hours were long, cold, frustrating, and sometimes scary. Most of the time, I didn't know what I was doing there. I had just started a new job and knew I should focus on it instead of a movement that I wasn't sure I fully supported. Although I wasn't sure why, I felt the Morrigan had sent me and so I kept going back until everyone was evicted from Zuccotti Park.

A year later, the true mission took shape. Hurricane Sandy hit the city and the Occupy connections were essential. There was widespread discomfort, illness, and trauma. My coven's Samhain was one of the few that could take place amid the storm damage. We used it as an opportunity to collect supplies for those affected by the storm. The Red Cross and National Guard slowly made their way to help, but Occupy Wall Street organizers were some of the first to reach those affected by the hurricane. My coven worked with the partnerships I'd formed to help get supplies to where they were needed. The Morrigan had summoned me to one battle for the sole purpose of preparing me for another one. The more I learned about the Morrigan at war, the more the dreams made

sense. I realized that stronger than her work on the battlefield was her work of strategizing, such as we'd done in the aftermath of Sandy.

The Morrigan is arguably best known for her warrior form, and for good reason. In many of the Morrigan's most famous myths, the sisters play crucial roles in winning battles. They strategize with heroes, summon exhausted kings to rise, and attack with magic. They bring about victory when it seems impossible. The Morrigan is even thought to have started the great war in the Irish epic the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ("The Cattle Raid of Cooley").

While the war goddess label may be obvious, it is also limiting. It suggests that the sisters' primary function is violence and bloodshed. Yet the Morrigan's relationship to war is complex, as was the Celt's relationship to it. Angelique Gulerovich Epstein writes, "All the messiness, all the intricacies, and the facets of the Morrigan are the facets, intricacies, and messiness of war as Irish knew it . . . Fame, glory, and terror—in war, all are one. And so, the Morrigan."¹

The Morrigan sisters were not the only war-faring Celtic goddesses. Brigid, as the regional goddess of the Irish province of Leinster, was known to fly and screech across the countryside to frighten off invaders, but she is better known for healing and smithworking. The Morrigan also has healing attributes, yet she is more commonly associated with war. Perhaps she originated in a particularly war-fraught era of Celtic Irish history. Maybe the details of her work in battle were better recorded than those of other goddesses. Perhaps the sisters were especially fierce on the battlefield. Ferocious depictions of such goddesses may give us a window into role models for Celtic women, fantasies of Celtic men, nightmares of the Christian monks who eventually penned the stories, or all of the above.² But these war goddesses were more than solely death-bringers and harbingers of despair. They represented the painful realities of the cycle of life: of eating and being eaten, expressed through the myths by the life and death cycles of the god-heroes.³ They may have also reflected the presence and importance of women in war.

WARS OF THE CELTS

The Celts were described by their contemporaries as a warrior society whose strength and courage, even to the point of foolhardiness, were admired and even emulated by other cultures. The status of warrior was highly sought after, especially among the Celtic aristocracy. Boys were trained to fight at an early age, and the taking up of arms indicated passage into manhood. According to the Greek philosopher Poseidonius, the Celts' appreciation for battle extended to social engagements in which mock battles would commence after meals.⁴ War, and preparation for it, ruled nearly all sectors of Celtic life. Celtic Irish warriors may have been especially fierce. Roman forts in Britain were supposedly built specifically for protection from Irish attack.⁵

The Celts' preparation was not without purpose. War was frequent in the Celtic era. Geographically, the Celtic world was vulnerable to foreign invasion. Internally, tribes frequently fought one another as well. Celtic Ireland itself was composed of well over two hundred kingdoms, each called a *tuath*, and land was a prize for the cattle it foddered. Cattle had a central role in the lives of the Irish Celts: Cattle was currency, as the Irish Celts did not have coin or paper currency. Cattle provided meat, milk products, hides, fodder for barter, and glory. Wars of this era were essentially cattle raids, but they also served to extend tribal boundaries, or even to enslave people from neighboring tribes.

Unlike depictions in movies and television, Celtic wars did not generally include a cascade collision of soldiers on horseback. Battles were fought with a handful of warriors, and most encounters lasted only a few hours.⁶ Perhaps to acknowledge the reality of these bloody situations, the Celts approached warfare with a strict, ritualistic battle code that may have included poetic performance.⁷ Battles began with single combat in which the challenger would recount the deeds of his ancestors and proclaim his own valorous qualities, while taunting his opponent, and concluded with a grieving lamentation over that opponent if slain.⁸ The victor would remove and keep the opponent's head, a trophy described as a "Mast of Macha."⁹ Wars may have been ultimately fought over riches, but the devotional aspect was never left behind. It is said that the true warrior, one who was not overcome by fear, was on good terms with the Morrigan.¹⁰

War was a collective effort, and the battlefield wasn't solely a

masculine domain. Tombs of venerated Celtic warrior women prove that they too fought for their tribes. Even the legendary Irish queen Medb was rumored to be buried in her battle gear, facing her northern enemies. While some women may have taken up arms, most had a different role on the battlefield. Celtic women attended battles, watching from a distance and encouraging the men to fight.¹¹ Knowing their wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and mothers-in-law were all in attendance, the men were likely to fight harder; and perhaps more importantly, they were discouraged from fleeing so as not to incur taunts from the women watching.

Another crucial element in Celtic battle was that of psychological warfare. Prior to battle, Celtic warriors clashed swords on shields, screamed, and sang, both to spur their own spirits and to terrify their enemies, while the women shrieked from the sidelines.¹² The din may have been designed to be so frightening that those under attack would flee before the warriors even appeared on the battlefield. The Celts understood that inspiring fear in the enemy and courage in the ally was every bit as important as the quality of the weapons, a critical role that belonged to the women and possibly the goddesses too.

Power and glory, courage, and faith all played into the wars of the Celts, and with them, petitions to their gods for protection. But the Celts may not have summoned a general “goddess of war.” Rather, they likely called upon the goddesses associated with the regions in which they lived. The land was considered female, cognizant, and divine. Goddesses were both divine beings and embodiments of the living earth itself, usually associated with specific geographic areas. If a regional goddess represented the social, legal, and ritual dominion of her specific area, it was believed this goddess would act in defense of it. The Morrigan sisters, as sovereign goddesses of Ireland, would certainly take an interest in her country's wars.

CÉT-CHATH MAIGE TUIRED (“THE FIRST BATTLE OF MAG TUIRED”)

The full myth of *Cét-chath Maige Tuired* is thick enough to fill a book of its own, and is unfortunately outside the scope of this one. However, the shortened version that follows highlights the

The Fir Bolg, children of the powerful Nemed, were forced to leave Ireland after suffering at the hands of the Fomorians. After a long period of exile, they returned to Ireland and ruled it for thirty years. One night, Eochaid, the high king of Ireland, had a terrifying dream, which he took to his wizard Cesard for interpretation.

“I saw a great flock of black birds,” said the king, “coming from the depths of the ocean. They settled over all of us, and fought with the people of Ireland. They brought confusion and destroyed us. One of us, methought, struck the noblest of the birds and cut off one of its wings. And now, Cesard, employ your skill and knowledge, and tell us the meaning of the vision.”

Cesard replied: “I have tidings for you: warriors are coming from across the sea. All kinds of death they will bring, for they are a people skilled in every art and magic spell. An evil spirit among them will come upon you and lead you astray. They will be victorious in every stress.”

“That,” said Eochaid, “is a prophecy of the coming to Ireland of enemies from far distant countries.”

The enemies Eochaid foresaw were the Tuatha Dé Danann. They too were children of the powerful Nemed and lived in exile, now returning to claim their ancestral land. When the Tuatha Dé arrived, the Fir Bolg discovered that they were not only brave and fierce warriors, but handsome, well appareled, skilled in music, and more. Proficient in every art, they were the most gifted people to ever come to Ireland. The Fir Bolg ambassador met with Bres, the Tuatha Dé ambassador. They recounted their ancestral lines and recognized each other as kin. Bres offered terms: the tribes could either peacefully split Ireland in two or engage in battle. But the Fir Bolg opted for battle, and so the Tuatha Dé moved west to make their battle plans.

Badb, Macha, and the Morrigan made a preemptive strike against the Fir Bolg. The three went to Tara and sent forth magic showers of sorcery, compact clouds of mist, a furious rain of fire, and a downpour of red blood from the air on the

Fir Bolg warriors' heads, allowing their enemies neither rest nor stay for three days and nights.

“A poor thing,” said the Fir Bolg, “that the sorcery of our sorcerers cannot protect us from the sorcery of the Tuatha Dé . . .”

Again, the Tuatha Dé offered peace if the Fir Bolg would agree to split Ireland in two. But the Fir Bolg refused. Therefore, each group prepared to fight. On the day of the battle, the Fir Bolg poet Fathach went ahead of the warriors to see the enemy. When he returned, the poet wept floods of melancholy tears as he reported what he saw:

“With what courage they advance! They marshal with endless might. The red Badb will thank them for the battles to come. Many bodies will be gnashed. Many a head shall be severed with vigor.”

The Fir Bolg were determined and thought the Tuatha Dé formed a prepared army. The Fir Bolg attacked and devastated them.

The next day, the Tuatha Dé returned to fight again. The great chiefs of the Tuatha Dé went out in front, and the women, Badb, Macha, Morrigan, and Danann accompanied them. The battles continued, fierce and painful, and many great heroes fell on all sides. The furies and monsters and hags of doom cried aloud so that their voices were heard in the rocks and waterfalls and in the hollows of the earth. It was like the fearful, agonizing cry on the last dreadful day when the human race will part from this world.

The Tuatha Dé advanced with the god Dagda at the lead and their greatest warriors behind him, along with the three sorceresses, Badb, Macha, and Morrigan, and their foster mothers, Bechuille and Danann. Warring feet pounded the earth until the hard turf grew soft beneath them. Each party inflicted tremendous wounds upon the other. Even Nuada, the Tuatha Dé king, was wounded in the battle and carried away. The Tuatha Dé continued, but the Fir Bolg did not back down, despite knowing they were nearly lost.

As the final battle began, Sreng the Fir Bolg ambassador challenged the Tuatha Dé king Nuada to single combat, but

because Nuada had been wounded, the fight was deemed unfair. The two groups made peace. The Tuatha Dé offered the Fir Bolg their choice of land. They chose the province of Connacht.

This story is what is called a teaching tale and may tell a history of Bronze Age (3000–1200 BCE) Irish settlers.¹⁴ It suggests that the early Irish did not consider themselves descendents of indigenous people, but rather descendants of “invaders” from many different parts of the world. It also tells us a few things about the Morrigan sisters.

In one sense, the Morrigan sisters represent ancestral forces. While the Fomorians appear as supernatural, sinister beings, they may have represented a real group of people who acted as oppressors in Ireland. Alternatively, they may have represented destructive environmental forces. This story may reflect a period in which tribes were forced from their regions after a foreign invasion or a series of ecological disasters, and details the conflict of these tribes' attempts to reclaim these lands. Through their inclusion among the Tuatha Dé, the Morrigan sisters represent ancestry for the Irish people.

In another sense, the sisters represent omens. Birds such as ravens, crows, or vultures, which Eochaid saw in his vision, were considered birds of death because of their presence on battlefields, devouring slain corpses. Seeing or hearing one could indicate death or battle to come. Even centuries into Christian Ireland, the call of a hooded crow would incite even “sturdy men” to abandon projects for the day, as it prophesied misfortune.¹⁵ These birds are frequently connected to the Morrigan sisters. For Eochaid, the Morrigan in animal form was a terrifying sight, as it meant death was coming for him and his people. Yet, the image was a positive omen for the Tuatha Dé. The birds' cries may have symbolized the traditional battle din prior to the fighting. The omen of the Morrigan could represent either triumph or tragedy. The vision of the birds arriving from the ocean might highlight the sisters' connection to the sea and other watery places.

The First Battle of Mag Tuired also reveals the Morrigan sisters' power over the elements. Their preemptive strike against the Fir Bolg with “magic showers of sorcery,” mists, fire, and a “downpour

of red blood” may represent weather phenomena such as fog, hail, or lightning. The red blood may also symbolize death or injury due to weather. Any of these would impact an army's resources and certainly their rest prior to the battle. The disturbance of rest might even represent another potential role of women in battle. We might imagine the women of one tuath either shrieking in the hills or sneaking into the beds of the men in the neighboring tuath, possibly keeping them awake all night before a raid, and making them less effective at protecting their property. However these details are interpreted, the works of magick demonstrate the expansive power of the Morrigan as a spirit of battle and the sisters' power as sorcerers.

A final element in this battle is that both the victors and the vanquished experience wounds and sorrow. If the Morrigan sisters represent the overall spirit of battle, they also reflect its painful reality. Under their influence, no triumph can exist without sorrow; but no sorrow is permanent, either. Perhaps one of the lessons the Morrigan sisters offer is that compromise can be preferable to fighting. Once the Fir Bolg embraced that lesson, they too found peace.

CATH TÁNAISTE MAIGE TUIRED (“THE SECOND BATTLE OF MAG TUIRED”)

The following myth takes place after the previous myth, when the Tuatha Dé faced yet another enemy. This is another shortened adaptation of a great myth.¹⁶

The Tuatha Dé Danann resided in the four cities of the north—Falias, Gorias, Murias, and Findias—studying the occult and sorcery, druidic arts, and witchcraft, and they surpassed the sages of these arts. They made an alliance with their former enemies, the Fomorians, and then defeated the Fir Bolg in the First Battle of Mag Tuired. It was in that battle that Nuada, the Tuatha Dé king, lost a hand and was therefore ineligible for kingship. Therefore, Bres of the Fomorians was made king of the Tuatha Dé to strengthen their alliance.

But King Bres and the other Fomorian kings demanded

great tribute, and the Tuatha Dé suffered. Their great warriors were reduced to serving Bres. Even the Dagda was forced to construct the earthwork around Bres's fort.

Miserable in their new positions, the Tuatha Dé devised a plan. Nuada's hand was healed and they restored him to his kingship, but Bres refused to part with his position. It was around this time when the shining young god Lugh appeared at the hall of the Tuatha Dé, possessing not just one skill but all the great skills of the Tuatha Dé. Nuada considered that, with Lugh's help, they might be able to release themselves from Fomorian bondage.

Lugh, the god Ogma, and the Dagda spent years planning, seeking support from the most powerful druids, the wisest lawyers, physicians, smiths, charioteers, and landowners. All pledged their gifts to defeat their common enemies. After the preparation for the battle had been settled, Lugh, Ogma, and the Dagda went to the three gods of Danu, who gave Lugh equipment for the battle.

“Undertake a battle of overthrowing,” the Morrigan chanted to Lugh. “Awake, make a hard slaughter, smiting bodies with furious attacks. The sound of battle shall be deafening, devastating all people who cry out, down to the last man . . .”¹⁷

The druid Figol mac Mamois said, “Battle will be waged,” both prophesying and lending strength to the Tuatha Dé Danann.

Then the Dagda met with the Morrigan. They lay together, and afterward the Morrigan offered him crucial information on defeating his enemy. She too met with the king of the Fomorians, surprising the king with two handfuls of blood and causing great injury and destruction.

The Tuatha Dé chanted against Fomorians, but still the enemy entered the land and threatened battle. The men of Ireland gathered to protect Lugh. His powerful allies offered an unceasing supply of weapons, the ability to heal even the fiercest wounds, the enchantment of trees to do their bidding, and fire from the sky against the enemy.

“And you, Morrigan,” asked Lugh, “What power do you

offer?"

"Not hard to say," she said. "What I shall follow, I shall hunt."

The battle waged daily, and the magick of the Tuatha Dé restored their weapons and brought slain warriors back to life; but the Fomorians continued. Lugh urged the people of Ireland to persevere so they could be free of bondage. The battle continued, as did the carnage. Nuada Silverhand and Macha, daughter of Ernmas, fell at the hands of Balor, the Fomorian grandson of Neit, whose evil, enchanted eye killed all who looked upon it. Lugh struck out the eye with his sling, slaying Balor as well as a number of Fomorians, as well as their own king.

It was then that the Morrigan appeared. She chanted, "Kings, arise to meet the battle! Cheeks will be seized, honors declared. Flesh shall be decimated, faces flayed. Ramparts will be sought, and feasts given. Battles are observed, poems are recited in their honor. Druids are celebrated, circuits are made. Bodies are recorded, metals are cut. Teeth mark, necks break. A hundred cuts blossom, screams are heard. Battalions are broken. Hosts give battle, ships are steered. Weapons protect, noses are severed. I see all who are born in the blood-zealous, vigorous battle, raging on the battlefield with blade scabbards. The enemy attempts our defeat over our own great torrents. Against your attack on the full complement of the Fomorians, in the mossy margins the helpful raven drives strife to our hardy hosts. Mustered, we prepare ourselves to destroy. To me, the full-blooded exploits shake to and fro of hound kills. Goodly decay of muddy war bands, your violations are renounced."¹⁸

Immediately after, the Fomorians were driven to the sea. The battle won, and the slaughter cleaned away, the Morrigan proceeded to announce the Tuatha Dé's great victory to all—the royal heights of Ireland and its sídhe hosts, its chief waters and its river mouths—and to this day, this is the reason Badb still relates great deeds.

"Have you any news?" the people asked the Morrigan, who declared: "Peace to sky, sky to earth. Earth below sky, strength in each one. I see cups overfull with honey, and

sufficiency of renown. There will be summer in winter, and warriors with spears, supported by forts. The forts shall be fiercely strong, sadness shall be banished, sheep shall be healthy, and the destructive battle cries held back. The branches of trees full of produce, and sons under patronage steering a bull of magical poetry. Knots in trees, trees for fire, fire when wished for. The borders shall declare prosperity, green growth after spring, horses increasing in autumn, a land strong and abundant with boundaries long-lasting. Have I a story, you ask? I tell you a story of peace to the sky, be it so lasting to the ninth generation.”

But then the Morrigan prophesied the end of the world and every evil, disease, and vengeance to come, as she chanted the following: “I shall not see a world which will be dear to me. Summer without blossoms, cattle without milk, women without modesty, men without valor, conquests without a king, walls with spear points on every plain. Sad mouths, forests without mast, sea without produce, tower wall of white metal, a multitude of storms around bare fortresses. Their dark buildings empty, high places cannot endure. A lake has attempted to flood past a multitude of kingdoms. Welcome to the future world's evil: howling occupies every face, great unbelievable torments, many crimes, battles waged everywhere. There shall be trust in spiked horses, many hostile meetings, treacherous princelings, a shroud of sorrows on old high judgments. I see false maxims of judges, each man a betrayer, every son a brigand. People will be born without surviving. It shall be an evil time in which the son will derange his father and in which each daughter shall derange . . .”¹⁹

Part of the original manuscript was lost and we will never know what the Morrigan meant to say after her final word, and so it is on this somber note that the otherwise triumphant myth concludes. Through both speeches it may be easy to see why the Morrigan developed a reputation both glorious and sinister. The Morrigan fought a battle against an oppressive force hurting her people in a variety of ways. She helped the god Lugh plan the attack. She met and united with the Dagda, something we'll study in greater depth in [chapter 7](#). In one sense, it is her joining forces with this god. She

promises to kill his enemies (a promise she keeps) and offers advice on military strategy. She promises to follow and hunt the Fomorians. This might mean she was acting as a spy. In many myths, several of the Morrigan sisters are wives of the god Neit, the grandfather of the Fomorian Balor, making it plausible that the Morrigan was acting as a spy on behalf of the Tuatha Dé Danann.²⁰ If we embrace this possibility, the Morrigan may be a goddess of taking risks to protect her people.

She encourages the kings to finish the battle when they are on the verge of exhaustion. The Morrigan largely acts alone in this, but the other sisters are present, too. Macha herself died at the battle of Balor, which is perhaps a symbol of a ruler losing their life for Ireland, or of the earth being injured through the course of battle. Lastly, it was the Morrigan who had the power to declare victory for the Tuatha Dé, and because of that, Badb is said to relate great deeds. This may mean that Badb, as sister to the Morrigan, inherited the ability to proclaim positive victory at the battle. It may also mean that certain oral traditions linked the Morrigan and Badb as one.

Yet, a key aspect of this myth is in powerful characters uttering a prophecy, with the intention of it coming true. The Morrigan prophesized the kings arising to battle and driving their enemies to the sea, and then it happened. She also prophesized a bountiful, blessed time for Ireland. But at the end, she prophesized the end of the world and the suffering it will involve. Was she warning her people, or speaking that wicked prophecy into being? The final prophecy could be warning of both ecological destruction and societal degradation—two consequences of war in a war-heavy culture. The Morrigan's speech may be a plea to wage war only when necessary, not as standard practice. In that, the war goddess does not thrive on war, but demonstrates complete understanding, without glamorizing it. Or, as Nightmare Queen, she may cause as much strife as support to humanity, fulfilling her reputation as one with a hateful heart. This is yet another paradox of the Morrigan we will never solve.

Either way, she serves as the voice of alarm. Alarms are, well, alarming; but they are also necessary, which the Morrigan acknowledges throughout this myth. Some interpretations suggest the Fomorians represent natural forces. This myth may have

originated at the dawn of agriculture in Ireland, and Balor may be a symbol for gaining control over the fertility and growing cycles of the earth.²¹ The battle might symbolize a young society's painstaking attempts to build itself in the face of difficult weather, disease, or famine. The evil eye of the Fomorian Balor may represent drought, which would destroy crops and wreck the harvest. In other theories, the Fomorians are mortal foreigners.²² The tale may also illustrate quarrels between tribes over territory. Either way, the Morrigan urges her people to “awake,” describing the coming horrors as though she knows the destructive power of the Fomorians.

The Second Battle of Mag Tuired also highlights the Morrigan's power in more than one world. She is mighty enough to command the kings, possibly indicating that she was a patron goddess to those in leadership. She can also communicate with both the mortal and non-mortal worlds, something we see when she announces the Tuatha Dé victory to both the *síde* hosts (the faery folk) and the people of Ireland. She is not only a powerful figure among the mortal, but among the immortal too, and she is able to shift back and forth between these different realms.

THE MORRIGAN AT WAR

Modern images of the Morrigan frequently depict a single woman either naked or dressed in scant armor, surrounded by black birds, often holding a weapon. She looks awfully dreamy-eyed for someone who is supposed to be going to war—and in quite impractical attire for battle (although it's sometimes rumored that Celts did go to battle while nude). There's nothing implicitly wrong with these images. Whether or not we like or agree with them, they are simply reflections of the artist's vision of the Morrigan. However, weapon-wielding images don't accurately reflect the Morrigan as she is described in the myths. Throughout their canon, none of the Morrigan sisters lift a single weapon. When the Morrigan met the Fomorians at the ford (after her tryst with the Dagda), her weapon was not defined. She appeared with two handfuls of blood, which suggests she herself was her own weapon. With this example being an exception, the sisters' primary battlefield roles do not involve violence as much as cooperation and voice. The Morrigan sisters, through their magick, changed the

circumstances of the fights. Their people could not have triumphed without them. Invoking the important role of Celtic women in war, they stand as a reminder that victory lives not in the hands of a few, but in the collective contributions of all involved.

Despite these examples, is it shortsighted to call the Morrigan a war goddess? Celtic wars were constant; would the Morrigan be a goddess of war, or a goddess of uncomfortable but unavoidable aspects of life? Either way, the Morrigan's warlike traits cannot be denied. The sisters were fierce fighters, but their function did not specifically encourage war for its own sake. They might be more aptly described as goddesses of strategy and collective strength, embodying the crucial parties for whom praise is often left unsung. The Morrigan would never be far from the battles of her people, but the sisters do not instigate so much as fortify and complete, offering defense through the tools of the earth, body, mind, and soul.

LIVING THE MYTHS

Being a warrior, the Morrigan attracts activists, soldiers, martial artists, and others who are attracted to different forms of battle. This can both attract and repel would-be devotees. I've heard people ask if one must be a warrior, or an activist specifically, to connect with the Morrigan. Because the Morrigan crosses all boundaries, I risk saying no—no one needs to consider themselves a warrior or activist to work with the Morrigan.

At the same time, our contemporary world is starved for people willing to be on the front lines of change, which may reflect some of the contemporary attraction to the warrior Morrigan. I cannot personally speak to military service or martial arts, but as a professional activist I know that glorious moments are a tiny part of the work. Most of it involves communication, cooperation, and knowing when to pass the torch. As the myths have revealed, the Morrigan spends as much of her time strategizing and planning as she does engaging in the actual fight. There are many things necessary to winning a battle, she seems to tell us. It's our task to listen for what those are.

But as writer and Pagan priest John Beckett points out, the Morrigan's call to action is multifaceted: "The battle the Morrigan

is fighting is not a literal war. She is not recruiting snipers or artillerymen. But those on the front lines of conflict—in the realms of politics, religion, culture, and the environment—need support every bit as much as those fighting with rifles and grenades. They need financial support, logistical support, emotional support, and spiritual support. There are many needs and many ways to fill those needs.”²³

So, what does the war-faring Morrigan mean to a contemporary devotee who will likely never see a physical battlefield or would rather stay home (figuratively or actually) from the marches? The answer is in widening the definition of battle. There are some battles we fight in our countries or communities, and plenty we fight within ourselves. Some devotees have said that they feel the Morrigan helps them fight issues such as chronic illnesses, these conditions being their personal Fomorians. Anthony Murphy, author of *Mythical Ireland*, suggests that the evil eye of Balor represents humanity's shadow, the battle being present to some extent in all of us:

The [evil] eye that sees malevolence and misdeeds in others and perhaps wants to act upon this prejudice is present in the very destructive and threatening forms in the world today. . .

It is more important that we kill the evil eye, that prejudice within us that wants to blame others for the ills of the world. . . .

“We must kill the evil eye within ourselves.”²⁴

The Morrigan's call, which summoned kings to battle, is also a call to awaken the most powerful parts within ourselves. Perhaps we struggle with internal enemies, such as the voices in our head that tell us we aren't good enough—the ones that feed insecurities, possibly making us cold or critical of others. The Great Queen's call urges us to drag these enemies out of ourselves, and make defeating them part of our spiritual journey.

The Morrigan's prophecy at the end of the Second Battle of Mag Tuired may be a warning against viewing either victory or defeat as a concrete conclusion. Battles end, whether inside or outside of

ourselves, but consistent vigilance is required to ensure they do not return. Take no victory or defeat for granted, the Morrigan reminds us. Part of embracing the Morrigan involves mindful awareness and being ever willing to push back against what hurts others or us.

HOW TO KNOW IF THE MORRIGAN HAS CALLED US

Recognizing a deity's call is a deeply personal experience. One person's call is not the call for someone else. For some, feeling inspired at a ritual honoring the Morrigan is one call. For others, it's reading the myths and finding themselves within them. It may be a longing in the heart, a tingling on the skin. For me, the gods have always manifested in dreams, as the Morrigan did prior to the Occupy Wall Street movement and Hurricane Sandy. For you, it could be something else altogether. My sense is that if you've picked up this book and read this far, you have already received a call from the Morrigan. Keep listening.

RITUAL: WORKING WITH THE BATTLEFIELD MORRIGAN

Perform this ritual in as quiet a place as you can find.

You will need:

- Three candles. Suggested colors: black, red, or purple. You can use all three of the same color or use a combination.
- A piece of paper
- Matches or a lighter
- A safe vessel in which to burn the paper
- Two “portions” of a blood offering—e.g., two pieces of meat, two drops of blood from a pricked finger, or two glasses of red liquid such as wine or pomegranate juice. These are meant to represent the “two handfuls of blood.”

Light the candles, whispering the name of one Morrigan sister for each one: Badb, Macha, and Morrighan (or Morrighu). Sit in silence for a few moments, reflecting on the source of your

opposition. Just before you are ready, write it down as succinctly and clearly as possible (e.g., “oppressive landlord” or “my addiction”). Long-winded requests often provide mixed results.

Say the following aloud three times, substituting the seventh line each time as suggested:

Washer of the Ford, Poet of the Sky, Summoner of the
Sovereign,

I awaken. I arise.

Clear my confusion, carry it on raven wings to distract
that which ails [*name the person or group affected by the
opposition*].

I am the black bird, the raven, the scald crow.

I scream and drive away the terror.

I awaken. I arise.

I am [1. *The shriek of Badb*; 2. *The force of Macha*; 3. *The
Morrigan's call*].

The valor of my opposition crumbles beneath my feet.

I awaken. I arise.

Burn the paper in silence. If possible, leave the offerings and ashes in your sacred space until the candles have burned down or out. Ideally, you'll be able to sit in your space until they all burn out, but if family or home duties call, know the magick is still at work. If you need to extinguish the candles and relight later, that is fine. Do not leave candles burning unattended, but be consistent with your burning—that is, do not leave half-burnt candles sitting idly for several days. When you are around and can monitor them, be sure to burn and tend to them. When the candles have burned all the way out, take the ashes outside and leave them on the ground. Wearing your heaviest shoes (I prefer boots), grind the ashes into the ground.

One note regarding your intention: The Morrigan sisters, as harbingers of justice, will contend with the person or situation in question, but they will also contend with those qualities within you. Let's say you perform the spell to protect yourself, as you suspect someone is sabotaging you out of jealousy. You will likely find yourself in a situation where you must acknowledge the effect

of your own jealous feelings on someone else. Facing our own shadow is often the most painful part of this process, yet it can also be one of the most blessed. Be open to embracing this part of the work and you may find it calls you to rise with the strength of the Morrigan summoning the sovereigns.

Power in the Fury: The Warrior's Motivation

Ever since I was little, I've had to be strong. I've had a lot of anger. At least, I thought it was anger. I wondered why it was so easy to get me riled up. The Morrigan had an answer.

To me, the Morrigan is a goddess of motivation. She gets you going and suffers no fools. When I was trying to leave a toxic friendship, I felt enormous rage. I was driving a familiar route and thinking of the situation, just furious about it, and I got the sense of Her. It was a cold feeling on the back of my neck, right where the nape met my shoulders. I felt Her say, "Give me your ego. I cannot help you if you don't let go."

A few days later, I heard, "You have the fiery blood of the warrior. You wait for the battle to begin so you can knock down the enemy and get it done. This is why you feel the fury." I suddenly realized that the familiar anger wasn't anger at all. It was fury.

She said, "One must have fury for battle, and it must come from somewhere. Your power is in your fury. The battles we wage in this time are different, but the tools are the same: preparation, purification, courage, bravery." I drew from this fury to exit that friendship and move forward with my life.

If I were to compare my experience of the Morrigan's presence to pop culture, I'd say it's like one of those movies with the battle scenes where everyone is on horses and their leader says something inspiring to get

everyone all hyped up. To me, that is the Morrigan. She is an igniter of battle passion, of fury and frenzy.

—Jaime O'Leary

CHAPTER 3

The Washer at the Ford: Queens of Death and Prophecy



Untitled by Lulu Brown

Most of my Morrigan stories begin with nightmares. This is another one.

A month after I poured the bottle of whiskey out at the Morrigan's shrine, I dreamed I was in a white room with busy, worried people who were trying to clean up a mess. My husband was among them, but it didn't feel like him. It was his face but not his voice when he looked at me and said, "Death is near." When I woke, I knew it was a message from the Morrigan. I wondered why she would appear as my male spouse. That would soon make itself clear.

A few days later, I traveled for work. On my first night, I woke

alarmed in my hotel room around 3 a.m. Thinking I was only unnerved about being away from home, I coaxed myself back to sleep. When I woke for the day, the hotel lobby was swarming with reporters and police officers. Around the time I'd suddenly awoken hours earlier, a woman had shot and killed her husband and their two small children before taking her own life, the tragedy occurring only a few floors below mine. From the elevator, the smell of blood was unmistakable. I tried to focus on work, but I was unnerved by the event and heavy with the guilt that accompanies prophetic dreams. *If I can't prevent it, why send me messages at all?* I asked the Morrigan.

Go for a walk, I felt her say.

That made sense. Fresh air would help. I made my way toward a back exit of the hotel, thinking it would be less crowded, but I was stopped by more police and paramedics.

The elevator opened and the gurney came out, a red shroud covering who I suspected was the woman's husband (a suspicion confirmed later). The police, the paramedics, and I, the lone civilian, all stood silently as the gurney was taken to the hearse.

The Morrigan had come to me as a death omen. She appeared as my husband perhaps to provide comfort in advance of the harrowing experience but also to plant a clue. Death didn't come to my husband, but it went to *someone's* husband. As I learned the details of the woman's battle with mental illness and how the man had tried to help her, I thought of the hero Cú Chulainn, who appears in many of the Morrigan's myths. Like the murdered husband, he received warnings but chose to fight anyway. Cú Chulainn fought for his people, and the man surely fought for his wife, but in the end they both lost their battles . . . and like so many battles, the dead included the innocent. I'm sure the woman received plenty of her own warnings. Did she try to heed them? Was her own battle too great? Maybe the Morrigan knows the answers, but we among the living never will.

Earlier, I'd wondered why the Morrigan came to me as she did. Having the prophetic dream must have meant that I had a part to play. In the myths, the sisters do not issue a warning only with the intent to scare someone. There is always a purpose, even if the sisters rarely issue instruction.

When the moment arrived, I knew what to do. As the gurney

passed, I prayed to the Morrigan that this man's soul would quickly find peace. I didn't know his religion, but if it had been me on that gurney, I would hope that a lone civilian might offer a prayer for my sake, even if we didn't share the same faith. It was all I could do. Maybe that was the Morrigan's plan for me all along.

The Morrigan is intimately acquainted with the most primal, frightening mystery in human experience: death. The terror around the mystery of death has prompted medical inventions and changes to our food cultivation. The very course of human evolution was built on the desire to evade or delay death for as long as possible. If the warrior is the most famous aspect of the Morrigan, her role as death omen may be the most formidable. The names of the Morrigan sisters were often used poetically in metaphors for severed heads and heaped corpses, equating them with madness, panic, frenzy, and death.¹ Whether it's a Tuatha Dé ancestor, an omen, or a metaphor for violent demise, the Morrigan partners with the great and terrifying mystery, knowing its secrets and sharing pieces of them when she feels moved to do so.

THE CELTS AND THE DEATH GODDESS

Did the Celts fear death as modern people do? Were they more intimately acquainted with it due to frequent battles? Was it considered as common as birth or sex and, like other facets of routine life, assigned its own deities? The Celts did not have one single deity of death, or a simplistic view of an afterlife. Death was neither an end nor a gateway to a faraway heaven. The dead were likely believed to coexist alongside the living, the afterlife existing in parallel with the current time. Dead ancestors were thought to be active in mortal lives, frequently communicating through dreams, and could be accessed through performing certain rituals or visiting sacred sites. This view of the dead was shared across the Celtic world. Tertullian, an early Christian theologian, said of the Celts: "It is often said because of visions in dreams that the dead truly live . . . [The Celts] spend the night near the tombs of their famous men." The Celtic idea of the afterlife was an ambiguous mixture of reincarnation and an otherworldly land of the dead, a world just out of touch for the living, and sometimes too close for comfort.

Some of the gods served as exalted ancestors, the thought being that they once lived mortal lives but ascended to the status of gods after death. Like the other members of the Tuatha Dé, the Morrigan may have been considered an ancestral force. As we saw in the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, the Morrigan could pass between the worlds of both the mortal and the *sídhe*, who had their own murky connections with the dead. This was another possible connection making it feasible that the Morrigan would be experienced with death—perhaps experienced enough to know when it was imminent. Given that the Celts believed their ancestors could communicate through dreams, the Queen of Nightmares may have had a reputation for delivering death omens to people while they slept. (My personal example illustrates that this is certainly true for the modern Morrigan!)

In the myths, the appearance of a Morrigan sister could be an omen of death, and nearly always an untimely death, usually of a revered warrior or king. When delivering an omen, the Morrigan might appear as a beautiful young woman or a hideous hag either alone or in triplicate. Given the Celtic Irish association of red with death, a sister appearing in red usually symbolized a death omen.

Badb was particularly fluent in portending death. She was sometimes described as “Badb the red-mouthed.” She may have had physically red or bloodied lips, the image both sensuous and ghastly. Modern pop culture fetishizes sexy vampires with bleeding mouths, the idea of an otherworldly being with the human life force in their mouths carving a place both alluring and grim in collective consciousness. The same may have been true for the Celts. The red-mouthed description may have symbolized the speaking of prophecies about death. And Badb's association with red could have also symbolized speaking truth to power. Badb typically speaks death omens to powerful men who ignore crucial details that lead to their undoing.

In *Bruiden Da Choca* (“Da Choca's Hostel”), Badb predicts the violent demise of a king who has broken many of his sacred taboos.² In Celtic Ireland, a king was bound by restrictions that, if violated, were believed to cast him and all of Ireland at risk for devastating consequences. In this myth, Badb is first a “red woman” at a ford washing her chariot; but when she lowers her hands to the water, the river becomes red with blood and gore. She

explains, “I wash the horse harness of a king who will perish.” Later in the story, Badb is described as a “big-mouthed, dark, eager, dusky” woman covered in soot who is lame, squinting with her left eye, and wearing a threadbare cloak. Her gray hair falls over her shoulders, her lips are on one side of her head, and she shares a prophecy that there will be more mangled bodies, including “necks without heads.”

A similar myth, “The Destruction of Dá Derga's Hostel,” describes a “Room of Badbs” where three naked women with jets of blood coming through them run around with “ropes of slaughter about their necks.”³ In the end of both myths, the king ignores Badb's prophecies and is slain. These are likely cautionary tales for kings to keep their taboos. Badb is an unwelcome, but important, note of alarm.

Sometimes it's unclear whether Badb, or any of the sisters, is relaying information about an impending death or directly causing it. One of the recipients, or victims, of this information is the hero, Cú Chulainn. An ancient superhero, Cú Chulainn was semi-divine, with a mortal mother and a divine father. He was a formidable warrior, perhaps most famous for defending his province against an entire army by himself. It is sometimes thought that the Morrigan was his patron goddess, even though the sisters are credited with both causing his death and trying to save him.

In one version of the death of Cú Chulainn, Badb appears as a crow atop the house where the hero resides and utters magick words that end up leading to his downfall. Later, when Cú Chulainn falls, she sweeps down from “the highest reaches of heaven” (again in crow form) to utter three cries, settling in the foliage of a hawthorn above him.⁴ The hawthorn tree is believed to be connected with the faery; and to injure one invites misfortune. Badb settling into such a tree highlights her ominous message and also may suggest that she caused his demise by speaking the death into being. This story may signify that even heroes cannot live forever, and the death goddess will eventually come to claim all.

Morrigan's death prophecies are better known for involving battle, but her goals are not always obvious. In some stories, the Morrigan sets up the hero to fail and perish, while in others she tries to guide him away from a fatal mistake. In the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (“The Cattle Raid of Cooley”), the Morrigan increases

strife between the two warring factions and warns of bloodlines dying out. This too could be the Morrigan creating carnage through her words. In another sense, the Morrigan may not be an instrument of destruction, but rather an embodiment of it: a personification of these particular warriors' attraction to self-destruction.

But the Morrigan as a death goddess could be peaceful and comforting, too. In another version of the story of Cú Chulainn's demise, the Morrigan promises to be a shelter at his death and then, appearing as birds, rests on the hero's shoulder as he passes away.⁵ As a goddess of battle, the Morrigan may choose sides; but as death goddess, like the previous story of Badb, she is impartial and eventually claims everyone. As the death goddess, the Morrigan may be the cause of some deaths, but she also provides peace in a mortal's final moments.

Macha is the sister who experiences physical death herself. In the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, she is killed in battle. In another myth, she dies in childbirth after being forced to race a king's horses while pregnant. This may suggest she is an immortal being returning to the otherworld.⁶ Alternatively, it may hint at an earth-goddess link whose form perishes in the winter and is reborn in the spring. As we'll see later in this chapter, the horse named for Macha had innate knowledge of his human's impending death. Because of her ability to die and be reborn, Macha too was familiar with the mysteries of death.

To the Celts, the Morrigan may have been as alluring and helpful as she was frightening. A goddess of war would naturally be aligned with death. To invite her was to entreat her—to beat death involved winning her graces. Just as death could be both a fright and a beacon of peace, the sisters could be both scary and comforting. But just as one cannot predict whether a death will be easy or painful, one could not know how the death goddess Morrigan would manifest.

BLACK BIRDS AND DEATH

The Morrigan's appearance in bird form frequently denotes an ill omen, usually one that heralds a death. Both the hooded crow and the raven (often called “the black bird” in Morrigan myths) are

associated with the Morrigan, and both likely symbolized death and destruction to the Celts. These scavenger birds gathered near battlefields waiting for fresh corpses to eat, perhaps inspiring a belief that they were ambassadors for the dead, carrying souls to the next life or bringing death itself to the world. While the birds themselves were not considered evil beings, their appearance could represent a threat to the living. Black birds were also believed to be prophetic. The Celts may have used birds in divination rituals, believing them to be intermediaries between gods and people, lending to a belief that the birds knew when death was imminent.⁷

Many people experience an increase of crows, ravens, or other black birds in their vicinity when working with the Morrigan, but these appearances don't necessarily mean that a physical death is imminent. The birds' appearance may simply be a sign that the Morrigan wants attention. It may mean she is listening. The birds may also signify a massive transformation, a symbolic death of one life and the beginning of another. A friend of mine had recurring dreams of ravens before she learned that she was moving across the country—a move she and her family very much wanted. Another friend, one in an unhappy marriage, experienced a murder of crows flying over her head when she first realized that she wanted a divorce.

At the same time, I have found it helpful to avoid overanalyzing potential omens. Living in a rural area, if I believed that every sighting of a crow meant death or major transformation were at hand, I'd spend all my time at funerals and packing moving boxes (and I do not). Instead, I take note of when the bird's appearance is unusual or timely. One Samhain (Halloween) morning, I woke to the sound of two crows cawing near my window. One crow was close, the other far away. I was living in New York City at the time and didn't encounter a lot of crows. Because they were unusual to my environment and crowed on the holiday associated with death, I innately knew I would lose two people that year—one who was close to me, and one with whom I was not as close. The omen came true and I did have two friends pass away that year.

If you begin working with the Morrigan and suddenly find yourself encountering an increased number of black birds, let her know you are listening (perhaps with a small offering or a prayer). If the birds are an actual omen, the details will manifest in time.

THE WASHER AT THE FORD

Badb washing the bloody chariot in the river illustrates one of the Morrigan's most famous (or infamous) forms: the washer at the ford. The washer is a feminine figure whom a character (typically male, but not always) might meet while she is washing clothes or armor at the ford of a river. In older myths, the washer identifies herself as being a member of the Tuatha Dé, which many believe connects her to the Morrigan. In later centuries, the washer either has no name or is referred to as “a Badb,” as opposed to *the* Badb. Still, the characteristics of the washer remain the same. When the washer appears, she nearly always offers a death prophecy. The washer may be a goddess, a faery, a mortal serving penance, or the soul of a mortal woman who died in childbirth, and is doomed to wash clothing at the river until her natural death arrives. Washers can be old or young, beautiful or ugly, and they usually prophesize doom without malice—but she may physically harm those who watch her. When coming across the washer, the clothing or armor she is said to wash is that of the person who sees her—a symbol of their impending death, as she is literally washing the blood and gore from their garments. Washer stories continued well into Christian Ireland. One washer uses raven imagery when offering a vile prophecy to a warrior:

The raven will croak tomorrow early
Upon thy cheek in the field of battle;
From the socket thine eye shall be forced;
Out of this much will come . . .⁸

The Morrigan may be the origin of the washer, or she may have absorbed myths of a pre-Celtic washer character into her own. Either way, the Morrigan embodies the washer in several myths. The appearance of a washer is rarely a good omen, but every rule in Irish lore has a thousand exceptions. The meeting of Morrigan with the Dagda at the Second Battle of Mag Tuired is an example of a washer at the ford, although the death she foretells is of the Dagda's enemies, not the Dagda himself, making this a positive washer encounter.

The washer manifests at watery places. In some myths, the

washer appears over a lake. Most commonly, the washer appears at rivers. For the Celts, rivers may have been a realm of the dead. This belief may originate with the pre-Celtic Irish, who sometimes deposited their dead in rivers, a practice the Celtic Irish may have adopted.⁹

An echo of this tradition can be found in the tale of the River Barrow in which Méche, son of the Morrigan, has three hearts with three “serpent shapes” with the potential to kill all life in Ireland growing within them. When Méche is killed by the hero Mac Cecht, the hearts are burned and their ashes thrown into the river.¹⁰

In the physical realm, rivers divided territories within the Celtic world. If rivers could separate the living from the living, rivers could also separate the living from the dead. The washer appearing at the ford, a natural place where the river can be crossed, straddled both worlds and could communicate information across this immortal boundary.

Rivers are excellent places to connect with the sisters, especially Badb, but I find that any watery space is a helpful Morrigan connection. The myths illustrate a gruesome character at the ford. I won't soften the Morrigan. Sometimes this is true. But death goddesses can be as comforting as they are terrifying. After a friend passed away, I sat beside a lake to grieve in Badb's presence. If you're working through grief, who better to walk you through it than goddesses intimately connected with loss—and where better to reach them than in their natural space?

THE MORRIGAN IN THE WARS OF TURLOUGH

This account of a war between two kings in medieval Ireland is one of the earliest references of a character known as the bean sídhe (banshee). The bean sídhe is thought to be another manifestation of the washer. Bean sídhes herald a death. Like the other washer characters, they can be beautiful or haggardly. Sometimes they weep; sometimes they're seen washing bloody garments at a river. They are best known for screaming in the night. Hearing the bean sídhe means that a death is imminent, but not necessarily for the person who hears her. The bean sídhe in the following story credits

her lineage to the Tuatha Dé Danann, which may indicate that she is a Morrigan sister. Some argue that all bean sídhes are an embodiment of the Morrigan because of this specific bean sídhe's lineage.

Over the shore of the bright lake rose a lone great, stooped, blue-faced, wretched, hunchbacked, grey-toothed, coarse-furred, crooked-nailed, tall, lean, red hag. The appearance of that spectral, squinting, watery-eyed, crooked, bent-shanked creature was like this: she had shaggy, rough-stranded, garlanded hair rough as heather, red and grey, which resembled seaweed . . .

The crone had a pile of heads, a load of spoils, and a heap of arms and legs which she scrubbed and firmly washed at the edge of the bank of the lake, so that all the water, its entire course, was full of hair and bloody brains.¹¹

When the warriors ask her name, she replies:

“My name is Brónach (‘Sorrowful’) of Burren, and the Tuatha Dé Danann is my noble lineage. This litter is your [men's] heads, oh noble high king,” said the withered apparition, “with your [own] head at the very center; for it is not your own, although you wear it. And although you proceed proudly to the site of contention, there is but a short time between you and your misery, for all but a few will be slaughtered.”¹²

When the men try to attack her, “she arose hurriedly with the rushing wind” delivering this prophecy of doom: “I tell you, your expedition is lamentable, the course east will bring great calamity.”

Later in the story, the warriors try to dismiss her as being “just a Badb” before meeting another apparition:

In the current she washed and laundred with great exertion old armour, satin clothing, noble jerkins made of gold thread, elegant shirts of fine silk and splendid imported goods, and [all the] spoils and garments of the host, so that the river below her was made a single stream of water and

blood, while from above her beautiful, sunlit droplets flowed in fierce, murmuring azure torrents of pure water over level sand.¹³

The change in this washer's work from mutilated bodies to refined goods suggests a message that even riches cannot prevent death. Note also that she does not harass the king and his troops just to be mean. The men hear this warning as a threat and believe her to be a tool of the enemy, although she is likely only pointing out a painful truth that "his head is not his own although he wears it," suggesting he is a false king, continuing Badb's practice of warning punishment for a false king as well as speaking uncomfortable truths to those in power.

The washer, the bean sídhe, and therefore the Morrigan, serve as warnings to stop an incorrect motion, just as the motion wants nothing more than to move. This may have further helped shape the Morrigan's sinister reputation, but the death goddess role of the Morrigan may simply bring unwelcome news and warnings. She also calls out uncomfortable truths. The kings did not want to hear that they were breaking taboos or that they were not righteous rulers. These may be lessons of misfortune that follow when the warnings are not heeded.

A MODERN WASHER MEETING

I do believe that my prophetic dream prior to the hotel murder was a visit from the washer. Washers tend to appear in ways unique to the person who receives the visit, coming to us in forms that will get us to stop and listen. Her methods may be specific to different people.

The bean sídhe, however, seems to maintain a traditional appearance, as she did for Molly Flanagan, an American of Irish descent living in Oregon:

My mother was all Irish and, God bless her, had several heart attacks over about seven years. In 1972, she had a very severe one. I was pregnant with my first child, and while I was visiting her in the hospital she told me she was going to live to see my child's first birthday.

Well, I had my son and all of a sudden he was a year old. Mother was delighted and came to the little party I had for him. We had a lovely time. That night, around midnight or one in the morning, I hear a screaming, a wailing in my backyard. I thought, *What the hell is that?* I peered out the window, and there was this figure in all black with a shawl around her head. And she's yelling and wailing and crying and moaning and really carrying on.

At first I thought that maybe it was a little old lady who'd wandered away from the nursing home down the road. I went outside, but the minute I got out there, she wasn't there. I thought, *Well, that's damn weird.* So I went back into my apartment and there she was again, wailing and howling and carrying on. I finally let it go and went back to sleep.

The phone woke me up around 7:15 in the morning. It was my dad. He said, "Your mom's gone." I told him about my weird experience the night before, and he said, "My God, that was the banshee."

THE DEATH OF CÚ CHULAINN

Cú Chulainn was invaluable to Ireland. Yet, his misstep was in refusing to listen to those who loved and supported him. In the following myth, an abbreviated version of a longer tale, he insists on fighting a battle that would lead to his death.¹⁴ Both Morrigan and a horse named for Macha try to stop him while the three witches, who may be embodiments of Badb, set him up for death. This myth offers several questions: Is the Morrigan on Cú Chulainn's side or against him? Is this a situation in which the sisters were divided? Or does the Morrigan exist on all sides—the living and the dying, the righteous and the wrong?

When Cú Chulainn's foes came for him for the last time, the land was filled with smoke and flames. Weapons fell from their racks, and the day of his death dawned. News of the impending enemies was brought to him, and the maiden Leborcham asked him to fight even though he was tired from the previous battle. But when Niamh, wife of the hero Conall Cernach and a friend to Cú Chulainn, also spoke to him, he

sprang to his feet and gathered his weapons, flinging his mantle around him. His own brooch fell and pierced his feet, another ominous sign. Still, he ordered his horse, the Gray of Macha, to be saddled.

“The Gray of Macha will not come,” said the charioteer. “If you must have this horse on your chariot, you must saddle him yourself.” Cú Chulainn went to his horse, but the Gray of Macha turned his left side to his master, refusing to be saddled. The hero scolded the horse, until the creature's loyalty overcame his hesitations. Still, the Gray of Macha wept big, round tears of blood at Cú Chulainn's feet.

Morrighu had broken Cú Chulainn's chariot the night before, but, undeterred, Cú Chulainn climbed aboard the chariot. One hundred and fifty queens saw him off, and as he drove away they wrung their hands, wept, and wailed, for they knew they would never see him again.

Not long into his journey he passed three crones, each blind in their left eye, cooking dog meat along with poisons and spells on a stick of rowan tree. Cú Chulainn meant to pass them, as it was a *geas*, (taboo) also spelled *geis* for him to go to a cooking hearth and consume the food there. It was also a *geas* for him to consume the flesh of a dog. As stopping would break both of his *geas*, he knew these women were not there for his good.

One crone called out to him, “Visit us, Cú Chulainn!”

“I will not, I say,” he replied.

“Ah, you hesitate because this meat is only a bit of hound,” the crone insisted. “I'm sure if this were a great cooking hearth, you would have stayed to dine with us. But because of the little that we have here, you are determined to pass us by. How awful it is that the great and powerful will not take the time to be with the small and weak!”

Moved by pity and shame, Cú Chulainn set aside his *geas* and dined with the women. Immediately, his hand and thigh seized and their normal strength could not be found. Still, he moved forward toward his battle and his enemy. Erc, son of Caibre, saw the great warrior in his chariot, his sword glowing red and the light of valor blazing about him, his

tricolored hair golden like the sparks on the anvil of a cunning craftsman. "He is coming!" cried Erc. "Prepare to meet him!"

The warriors made a ring, linking their shields together, and prepared to trick the warrior into relinquishing his weapons. But Cú Chulainn rushed against them in his chariot and slaughtered them all, so that their bones were scattered throughout the countryside and their brains grayed the landscape. And though they tried to take his spear, he killed dozens until Erc collected it, thrusting it at Cú Chulainn, but it struck the Gray of Macha. Cú Chulainn snatched it out. Knowing the horse was injured and his own time was also nigh, the hero said goodbye and Macha left him, with half the yoke still around his neck. Thus another prophecy was fulfilled: one that said if the spear of Cú Chulainn were taken from him, it would kill a king. This king was the Gray of Macha—the king of the steeds.

Then, Lugaid flung the spear and struck Cú Chulainn, slicing him open and spilling his bowels. Now gravely injured, Cú Chulainn gathered his bowels back into himself and walked to the nearby lake, drank his drink, washed himself, and came forth to die, calling upon his enemies to meet him. He went to a pillar stone on the plain, using his breast girdle to attach himself to it so that he might die standing up.

Erc approached him and said, "It is a shame that we do not take your head in revenge for my father's head, which you took."

It was then that the Gray of Macha returned, remaining with Cú Chulainn for as long as his soul was still within him and the light of valor remained around his head. The horse ran three bloody routes around him, killing fifty warriors with his teeth and thirty by each of his hoofs, hence the saying, "Not keener were the victorious courses of the Gray of Macha after Cú Chulainn's slaughter."

It was then that the battle goddess Morrighu and her sisters arrived, in the form of scald crows, and sat on his shoulders. Lugaid cut off Cú Chulainn's head and the sword fell from Cú Chulainn's hand, cutting off Lugaid's own hand when it fell.

In revenge, Lugaid cut off one of Cú Chulainn's hands. His enemies marched south, leaving Cú Chulainn's corpse behind him. The hosts of Ulster fled after them but were met by the Gray of Macha, who was streaming with blood. Upon seeing the horse, they knew Cú Chulainn had been slain.

The horse led the warriors to the fallen Cú Chulainn and placed his head on the dead hero's chest, so great was the Gray of Macha's love for his master.

The Morrigan manifests as several roles in this myth. First, Morrighu is the helpful antagonist, protecting Cú Chulainn by creating an obstacle. The horse dedicated to Macha shows a fiercely loyal nature. Badb's possible manifestation through the three wicked crones may seem evil, but it could be a warning against letting pride take one away from their personal path. The stick of rowan wood may be another trick meant to ensure that Cú Chulainn stayed dead, as rowan was believed to keep the dead from rising.¹⁵ Lastly, the scald crows of Morrighu and her sisters may demonstrate a psychopomp role—carrying Cú Chulainn's soul to the afterlife, possibly through eating his corpse.¹⁶

If the Morrigan is the patron goddess of Cú Chulainn, it's a complicated relationship in which she helps, hurts, and finally steals away his soul. But a patron goddess is not a guardian angel meant only to support and protect. Patron deities challenge as much as support, teaching through painful lessons. The Morrigan might be a manifestation of the hero's fighting spirit, one that guides him as to when to take risks, and the same spirit that ultimately propels him to a hero's death. In that manifestation, the Morrigan represents the potentially fraught relationship between hero and himself. A warrior may feel conflicted about their role, torn between obligations to friends and family and a call to action. The death omen of the Morrigan may offer an additional challenge to the hero, questioning whether they are ready to lay down their lives for their cause.

In the following version of Cú Chulainn's death, Badb is both the instigator and the line of defense for Cú Chulainn.

Brislech Mór Maige Murtheimne (“The Great Defeat on Muirtheimne Plain”)

In this tale, the Morrigan sisters work together to entrap and kill the hero Cú Chulainn, using elements of nature and tricks of the mind. This retelling has been adapted and shortened.¹⁷

Catalin's daughters, three misshapen, fluttering, and swooping beings, came to look for Cú Chulainn but could not find him where they last saw him. Instantly, they knew the hero's family protected him. Using their magic, they created a moaning magic wind, and rose upon it like birds and soared through the air, searching the entire countryside until they caught sight of Liath Macha, the horse Cú Chulainn rode in the Glen of the Deaf. They heard the music and laughter of a feast and knew Cú Chulainn must be inside.

The sisters gathered sharp-spiked thistles, light puffballs, and the withered leaves of the forest, morphing them into an army of battle-clad warriors. Thus, they turned the quiet glen into a battlefield, complete not only with warriors but also wailing women, burnings, and warring trumpets. The women in the glen, hearing the noise, returned the battle cry. Cú Chulainn declared he would fight. But the druid Cathbad urged restraint: "These are but idle and fleeing faery noises designed to trick you. Pay them no mind. Stay at the banquet."

Catalin's daughters wearied, and one of them, Badb, said to her sisters, "Keep this battle going. I will enter the glen and attack Cú Chulainn myself, although it may mean my death." Badb raced shamelessly and madly to the palace and transformed herself to look and sound like Niamh, a friend of Cú Chulainn's, and asked to speak to the queen. The queen arrived with a company of women, including the true Niamh. Badb used her powers to confuse the women, who scattered through the glen. Still disguised as Niamh, Badb found Cú Chulainn.

"My soul! My hero! My warrior!" Badb exclaimed. "Ireland is burning and ravaged. King Conchobar will slay me for having told you this, I know, but . . ." She begged him to join the battle.

Cú Chulainn paused, bewildered at the change of heart from the woman he thought was Niamh. "How will I ever

trust women again?" he asked. "I thought that you would never encourage me to go, not for all the gold in the world. But since you insist, I will go and fight."

Cú Chulainn left the palace, followed by Cathbad and Genann and the women, all of whom laid hands on him, trying to hold him back from leaving the glen. The true Niamh realized what had happened and pleaded with him: "Never for all the gold in the world would I have asked you to go! Calatin's daughter Badb tricked you by appearing as me!"

But Cú Chulainn, having lost trust in her and in all women, insisted his horses be prepared for battle. Liath Macha, his trusted horse, fought his handler until dusky tears of blood ran down his cheeks. Still, Cú Chulainn insisted on fighting, believing in the visions of burnings and plunderers devastating the country.

"Do not go," said Cathbad. "For the fighting you see is only a witch's spell. There is nothing there but leaves and grass." The women too begged and pleaded, wept and wailed. "These are only magic phantasms! Pay them no mind!"

Cú Chulainn, still unmoved, declared, "I pledge my word. Until I assault the men of Erin's camp, from this task I never will hold back." Cathbad followed him as he entered the Ford of Washing. There they saw a maiden, slender and white of her body, yellow of her hair. She wept as she washed and wrung bloodied spoils on the bank of the ford.

"Do you not see her?" asked Cathbad. "She is Badb's daughter, and it is your armor she washes. She signifies your death should you go to face this enemy in battle."

The final passage of this myth includes Cú Chulainn's vision of Christian angels, who try to turn him away from fighting. It's likely that this story was changed by monks, who included their own religious images. This was a common protective measure, as the Church was unlikely to support the preservation of the old Pagan mythology unless it could be folded into their own religion.

Cú Chulainn wanted to help his country. Cú Chulainn also wanted glory for himself. Badb played to these desires and caused confusion among Cú Chulainn's allies. Meanwhile, Macha's

surrogate warned against it. Through the blood and guts in the water, Badb's daughter warned of the battle's outcome if Cú Chulainn went forward with it. Could Badb have only been testing the hero's determination? It also highlights the sisters' roles as both protagonists and enemies of the hero, simultaneously encouraging and attempting to prevent his death, perhaps illuminating the Celts' understanding of their war and death gods as being as shifty and unpredictable as the course of battle itself. Finally, the story may be a cautionary tale about being careful of whom you trust.

In some interpretations of this myth, Catalin's daughters wanted to avenge Catalin's death, which took place at the hands of Cú Chulainn before the story began. In that case, Badb is not a spirit of hatred or cruelty, but one of revenge. Alternatively, Badb represents Cú Chulainn's desire to protect others at the cost of his own life, which may mean the tale urges self-preservation.

The simultaneous encouragement and discouragement of the hero toward death is yet another Morrigan paradox. Did the sisters set up these situations? Or, as goddesses of death, were they naturally drawn to a forthcoming demise? Does this story warn against taking on fights that do not belong to us, or is it a cautionary tale against rampant individualism? Was Cú Chulainn's ego his own undoing? No matter the perspective, the sisters offer warning about the death to come.

THE WASHER AND US

The Morrigan appears as the washer either to get our attention or to deliver a warning. This warning may portend a literal death, as it was for me and Molly Flanagan—but those experiences are less common. More often, the washer's appearance signifies a transformation, as it did for the two friends mentioned above. Like the myth of Cú Chulainn's death, the situation may be unavoidable. The Morrigan's appearance as the death omen (whether a literal or symbolic one) may be a warning, but also a reminder that she is there. Just as she waited with Cú Chulainn while he transitioned out of life, she may simply be there so that we need not undertake the experience alone. Perhaps the Morrigan didn't send me to witness that awful moment when the gurney came through the lobby. Perhaps the washer appeared to let me know she would be

with me during the experience—a comfort in retrospect.

The washer may also appear to offer a warning about our personal paths, just as Badb warned the king about being unrighteous. But personal righteousness, in this case, does not need to be about being “perfect” or morally superior. Righteousness, for our purposes, is about being in right relationship with ourselves. When the washer appears, it may be time to take stock of what isn't working in our lives. The washer may be warning us away from bad relationships, toxic work environments, or paths that are not right for us. If any of these feel extremely laborious or painful, the washer's appearance may be a sign that it's time to let it pass away. We can learn from the myths and heed the warnings, as doing so will ultimately make us stronger.

HOW TO KNOW IF THE WASHER HAS APPEARED

Quite often, it will be obvious if the washer has appeared. You'll seem them in a startling dream, or they'll manifest during a psychic moment. It may come through unusual appearances of black birds. You may suddenly see images of the Morrigan as death omen in artwork or online. One of the myths you've just read may have resonated on a deep level. Sometimes, however, the signs are rather quiet. If you sense the washer is trying to warn you about something, it can be helpful to ask for a confirmation sign. A helpful practice is to wait for three signs. Seeing one crow may not be enough to signify a visit from the washer; but seeing crows at the same time every day for three days in a row might mean she is trying to get your attention.

If you believe you've had a washer visit but you're not sure what it means, or if you're not sure you've had a visit from the washer at all, ask the Morrigan for clarity. Given that the washer can be scary, it might be a good idea to request clarity in a gentle, less frightening form.

RITUAL: DRAWING STRENGTH FROM THE DEATH GODDESS MORRIGAN

This rite may be performed solo or with a group, and is ideal for

comforting the dead or the dying, or for aiding oneself or others with a personal transition or transformation. Reaching out to the Morrigan in her washer or death goddess form brings strength and resilience in trying times.

To do this rite, find a place where you or your group can make some good, loud noise. This should not be done at the bedside of a dying person or in the room with a recently deceased person. Even after death, the noise will make for a difficult transition for the soul and should be performed far out of the person's earshot. The purpose here is to clear the way for them to make a peaceful transition. If possible, acquire consent from the dying person or their family before performing the ritual.

Decorate a table with a picture or favored possession of the recently or soon-to-be deceased person, along with items of comfort—tea, flowers, etc. There is a tendency to want to set skulls or other death items in a sacred space assigned for the dead. This is typically fine for those who have been deceased for a while, but it can be frightening for those who are soon-to-be or recently deceased. This can also be painful for those in mourning. The rite's goal is to assist with a peaceful passing. Include effigies of the sisters around the picture or item. Beside each effigy, light a white candle.

Assign someone to lead the following chant, or lead it yourself:

Great Queens of this world and that,
May Badb absorb the terror,
May Morrighu lead the way,
May Macha comfort the mourning.

Say the chant at least three times (more is even better). Continue until the room feels as though it's buzzing and the words blur. Then cease the chant.

Assign someone to say the following words or say them yourself. Even if the deceased or dying person was hearing-impaired in life, this part of the exercise is crucial. Physical hearing is different from spiritual hearing, and it is the spiritual hearing we want to protect with this rite.

I/We invoke the Glen of the Deaf, so that my/our beloved [name] may pass peacefully from this realm to the next. They shall not hear the sounds we make tonight as we make the way for them to pass in peace.

If you are performing this rite alone, envision a thick cloud of mist surrounding the dying or recently deceased person. If you are leading the group, encourage the participants to imagine this vision.

Assign someone to say the following words, or say them yourself:

I/We invite Badb to lead us in a scream, to frighten away any beings, malevolent or otherwise, who would interfere with [name]'s crossing in peace.

Let out or lead a scream, envisioning the removal or banishment of anything blocking the path of the dying or recently deceased.

Assign someone to say the following words, or say them yourself:

I/We invite Macha to comfort me/us in my/our grief as I/we let out our wail.

Let out or lead a second scream. If tears are shed, let them flow until they stop.

Assign someone to say the following words, or say them yourself if you are alone. (Note: Do NOT skip this step. The dying or deceased person must be able to receive signals to leave this realm and cannot be left in the Glen of the Deaf.)

With these words and tears shed, I/we ask that the mists be lifted from [name] so that they may receive the guidance to leave this realm in peace and move to the next one in peace.

Envision or walk your attendees through envisioning the mist lifting from the dying or deceased.

Finally, assign someone to say the following words, or say them yourself:

I/we invite Morrighu to spread Her black wings, to shift into a form [name] will recognize and love, and allow Her to carry them to the next world, where they will find peace.

Conclude this ritual with an offering for the sisters. If the person is in the process of dying, light the candles daily until they have passed. If they have already passed, light them daily for three days.

For a Personal Transition

If you would like to adapt this rite for a major transition in life, such as the death of a relationship, job, or dream, specify what realms you are moving out of and into, such as, "I invoke the Glen of the Deaf, so that I may pass peacefully from the realm of being partnered to being single . . ."

Badb Pays in Kind

She's terrifying, but I don't see her as dark or light. To me, she's been a force of nature. Hurricanes are scary. I've lived through a few of them. But it's just nature. Badb can be hard, but she has never been cruel to me.

Years ago, my personal life was falling apart, despite my efforts to hold it together by will and fantasy. My marriage was ending. I lived in a very bad neighborhood. I didn't sleep well most nights because I was afraid of getting shot. There were drug deals under my balcony. This was not me being extra about things. I had no money, I didn't know who the hell I was or what I was doing. I felt like absolute garbage, like I had nothing to offer the world. At the same time, I was helping plan a Morrigan retreat, where my then husband would also be attending. The whole situation was very painful.

At that retreat, I helped facilitate a Morrigan dedication at a river. Three days before the ritual began, I slipped and cut myself in that river, getting a gash that

looked like claw marks, and I bled in the water.

Accept what you need and you'll have the gifts you want,
I felt Her say. *It's going to hurt.*

Oh, it hurt. In both body and spirit. I felt as if my soul was bleeding out. But I left that retreat with a backbone of steel, a gift I wanted as part of the gift I needed. In the following weeks, my husband moved out but I stayed calm. I focused on finding a new apartment and paying my own bills, which I did. The gifts I needed included removing much that I had built my identity and worth around. I learned that I am not other people's stories of me. I found happiness and laughter and personal power. All the while, She reminded me to fight for myself and to do it with grace. As I have kept my oaths to Badb, She has made good on Her words to me, because Badb always pays in kind.

—Mayra Cañas

CHAPTER 4

Goddess? Faery? Both?



“Lunar Raven Cycle” by Laura Tempest Zakroff

I was invited to a Morrigan ritual led by a woman with a reputation for being an expert on the deity. I brought along an old friend. Before the ritual, we shared with each other what we hoped to gain from the rite, and we both admitted we were a little nervous. We knew how serious this woman and her group were and didn't want to do anything "wrong" at the ritual.

When we arrived, the air was choked with incense and sage. The home was full of guests, but no one spoke above a whisper. Our hostess, the Morrigan expert, was dressed all in black. She took us both by the hands and said ominously, "Welcome to the Darkness." We were ushered into the living room, which doubled as the ritual space. Another woman, also dressed in black, chanted at a large altar lit with dozens of candles around effigies of the sisters. The hostess motioned to the two seats reserved for us. My friend started coughing vigorously, trying to cover a laugh.

They were seating us beside a giant pig statue.

Backstory: My friend and I have an inside joke about pigs. When one calls, the other answers with pig noises. We gift each other pig things and text each other pig gifs. It's silly and annoys everyone, but it gives us so much joy. (Also, who keeps a pig statue in their living room??)

We were in danger of ruining the ritual . . . and our own reputations as serious devotees.

The ritual began, as did the music, a low hum that would have normally been relaxing except that the speaker sat behind the statue, making it seem like the pig was moaning. Around us people prayed, sang, and wept quietly, but I spent the ceremony white-knuckled trying not to look at my friend. Afterward, we thanked the hostess and left quickly, racing to the car before losing ourselves in laughter so deep and raucous that my sides hurt for three days afterward.

Was the Morrigan trying to teach me that the sisters have a sense of humor? Was it a warning against taking rituals too seriously? Was my dedication being tested?

Maybe all of the above.

Or maybe I'd met the faery Morrigan.

THE CELTS AND THE FAERIES

Popular culture has carved a deep impression of faeries as gentle, benevolent, and adorable creatures, like the bumbling trio from *Sleeping Beauty* or the precocious Tinker Bell. Glittery, spritely, generally of good nature, and existing solely to help mortals: this is how most modern people understand faeries. Traditional faery lore, however, paints a very different picture. Faery lore is deeply tied to the spirituality of the Celtic world, particularly in Ireland, where the human relationship to faeries has historically been a complicated mix of fear, awe, and reverence.

Faeries are cunning. They can also be cruel. Some are beautiful, some ugly. Some are believed to have middling interest in humanity, and others are said to hunt humans down for sport. They can be kind or tricky, blessing or cursing, or stealing milk, butter, and human babies. Perhaps most importantly (and most commonly misunderstood), they have not traditionally been believed to do humanity's bidding. Like humans, they were understood to have their own agenda, morals, and cultures.

In Irish lore, humans usually try to avoid faeries or struggle to break a faery curse after inadvertently angering one. They are not automatic friends to humankind, but they are not our natural enemies, either. Occasionally, faeries could be helpful to humans. Badb, as we have learned, was sometimes considered to be a “bad faery.” The Morrigan could be known as “the Great Faery,” and Macha, as we will see in this chapter, is sometimes believed to be a faery as well.¹

Celtic, and possibly pre-Celtic, Irish believed gods or godlike creatures resided in the hills, raths, and ring forts that dotted the countryside. These beliefs may have evolved into belief in the faeries, something that continued well into Christian Ireland.² Some myths say that the faeries are the spiritual races of the Fir Bolg, the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Milesians, or a combination.³ One story says that when the ancestors of the modern Irish arrived on the island, the Tuatha Dé were already in full possession of Ireland but assumed invisibility or disappeared into the hills, reappearing at any time they chose, and thus becoming a faery race.⁴ As Christianity became a stronger force in Ireland, faeries were said to be “not good enough for heaven, not bad enough for hell,” yet it

was believed that Christian symbols could wield power over them.⁵ Other theories include faeries being demoted gods of earlier polytheist religions, descendants of animal spirits, or wandering souls of the dead.⁶ The term “faery” has been ascribed to a number of different spiritual beings, including the leprechaun and the selkie—a being that takes the form of a seal while in the water but a human on land, often marrying and living with a mortal for a time.

Faeries could travel through the air, and live underground or beneath the forts or houses of mortal people. On the holidays of Samhain (the early November Celtic feast in honor of the dead), and Beltane (early May), faeries and deceased mortals could move freely among the living, playing music, feasting, and making love. They could also go to war. They might occasionally interfere with human activities, either to help or to harm. Sometimes, humans who were murdered or killed in combat were believed to reside among the faeries until their natural time came.⁷

Faery interference in human life answered some of the most puzzling of life's mysteries, particularly questions about the untimely death of young people, epidemics among cattle, climate disaster, and disease. Blaming faeries for stealing cattle or babies, or for exchanging their babies with mortal ones (called “changelings”), could help a young cowherd explain the disappearance of valuable livestock, or help a new parent understand a suddenly colicky baby. Faeries were believed to direct human warfare and control natural phenomena, and they had the power to make harvests prosperous or rotten. In some areas, faeries were even blamed for Ireland's Great Famine, which was sometimes attributed to disturbed conditions in the faery world.⁸

Raths and mounds, ruins of Stone Age structures usually covered in earth, were traditionally believed to be dwelling places for the faeries. Irish lore is filled with stories of faeries taking revenge on mortals who interfered with these spaces, whether the mortals meant to do so or not. In one story, a farmer who unknowingly tilled a rath got a splinter in his hand. The hand decayed and was eventually lost, the belief being that the faeries had cursed him for damaging their space.⁹ These sites, along with standing stones, stone circles, and ancient burial grounds, continue to carry strong

otherworldly associations. Even today, strong rules remain about when and how to approach these places, such as not lingering at such sites once the sun sets.

This may be a custom inherited from the Celtic era, when the community's territory was their whole world. Everything outside of that world was strange, chaotic, and scary. It's possible that mortal outsiders (such as foreign newcomers) may have been confused with faeries.¹⁰ A new tribe in the region with a different language, customs, and perhaps different technology may be considered otherworldly or magickal. The landscapes associated with faeries (ring forts, hills, raths, and watery places) were liminal places not belonging to humans or faeries, but were still vested to the faeries in some way. This may reflect an older social organization of the Celtic world, but one that remains intact in the laws of faery.¹¹ Rivers divided tribal territories, creating the understanding that the river belonged to neither tribe; yet crossing the boundary was an invasion, and therefore a danger to the person crossing it. Rivers also provided travel, a literal road to other cultures. Through these associations, rivers and other watery places became associated with faeries too.¹²

THE MORRIGAN: GODDESSES AMONG THE FAERIES

The faery world contained different castes, one of which belonged to the *sídhe*, an immortal race possibly connected to gods, ancestors, or a pre-Celtic Irish people. Majestic beings of marvelous beauty, the *sídhe* could appear in male, female, or genderless human form, but were divine in nature. It is within the *sídhe* caste that the Morrigan sisters were believed to dwell. While historically the Morrigan was primarily recognized as a goddess, the sisters' names are periodically interchanged with titles for faeries—and the sisters certainly act as such. They steal cattle, change shape, manifest both in the air and near water, and run in and out of hills and mounds typically associated with the *sídhe*. As is true to faery lore, the Morrigan curses mortals who cross her, but she also heals and blesses when moved to do so. As we'll see later in the chapter, Macha appears as a mysterious faery woman in one of her most famous myths.

The nature of faeries and Celtic deities is far more fluid than transfixed. It might be easy to label the Morrigan as a “faery goddess” or “goddess of faeries,” but such labels aren't fully accurate. The Morrigan is sometimes a faery, but not always. The faeries can be deities, but only sometimes. Just as the sisters move in and out of the mortal and faery realms, they also weave through, around, and outside of their faery identities.

Counter to the modern idea of faeries as peaceful, fun-loving beings, the contemporary Morrigan's reputation as a warfaring goddess actually serves to further highlight her faery connection. Faeries were believed to go to war amongst each other and with humans, and sometimes they interfered with human battles for their own purposes (occasionally just for fun). The Morrigan sisters used faery battlefield tactics such as ruining corn, milk, and fruit crops and wielding magick such as in the First Battle of Mag Tuired, when Badb and other “hags of doom” let out such an agonizing cry that they were heard in standard faery sites: the cliffs, waterfalls, and caves beneath the earth. In the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, the Morrigan proclaims victory to both the mortals and the *sídh*e hosts, as well as watery places.

The Morrigan's role as a death omen may also be rooted in her role as a faery. The relationship between the faeries and the dead is complicated, but tangible. Collections of faeries sometimes contain the spirits of the human dead. In some stories, individuals catch a glimpse of their dead relatives and friends among the faeries, and humans lost in faeryland may find that they suffered a mortal death.¹³ At Samhain, the deceased were believed to come out of their graves to dance with the faeries. Even centuries into Christian Ireland, it was considered dangerous to be out on Samhain Eve, as neither ghost nor faery liked to be disturbed by mortals. It was also on Samhain Eve that the Morrigan was said to emerge from Oweynagat, the Cave of the Cats. Ring forts, which were often called faery mounds, contained the remains of pre-Celtic Irish and might also have been an occasional resting place of Celtic Irish dead.¹⁴ These places were believed to be residences of ancestors and faeries and gateways to the otherworld, and they were also often associated with the Morrigan.

If faeries helped explain the unexplainable (such as why the milk didn't churn to butter), they also made sense of tragedy. In one

story, a hero is carried off the battlefield by a golden-haired faery, insinuating that he died in battle.¹⁵ In the popular Yeats poem “The Stolen Child,” a child is whisked away to faeryland. The poem lists the mortal world experiences he will never have again, suggesting the child died. Faeries were beings of untold power who could make an already difficult world even more punishing, but the concept of faeries offered comfort as well. The idea of a beautiful, immortal world existing in parallel to one of illness, grief, and death may have made difficult times easier to bear for the Celts and their descendents.

These stories tell us about the faery nature of the Morrigan. Faeries have their own world, conflicts, and agendas, as does the Morrigan. This may be what creates a feeling of distance for those who seek the sisters. I've spoken with many people who feel the Morrigan's presence fades in and out of their lives, leaving them to wonder if they've upset her. I too have experienced the Morrigan both strongly and faintly, as compared to other deities whose presence is more consistent. This may be part of her faery nature, appearing when she has purpose for doing so, and then fading back into the mounds (literally or figuratively) to attend to business that has nothing to do with us. When the Morrigan's presence is palpable, her assistance is invaluable. When she is distant, she has not necessarily abandoned us and will return when she's ready. Like the faery beings they are known to be, the sisters can bring great challenges to our lives. They can also be comforting.

MYTHS OF MORRIGAN AS FAERY

While the sisters are not specifically underscored as faeries in these myths, their actions indicate a traditional faery nature.

Mag mBreg (“The Plain of Brega”)

The following myth tells the story of a mortal man who wished to marry a faery woman, and how the Morrigan was helpful to him in doing so. It has been adapted and shortened.¹⁶

The druid Tulchine loved and wished to marry Dil, a woman from the Land of Promise (also known as Falga). Dil loved an ox named Brega beyond the rest of the cattle. The ox was

special. It was born at the same hour as she, and she loved it so much that Tulchine could not marry her unless he took the ox as well. As Dil's ox resided in the Land of Promise, removing it from its land was no small feat. Tulchine prayed to the Morrigan that the ox might be released to graze on the plain that he cared for. The Morrigan was good to him, and Brega was permitted to graze on Tulchine's plain. Dil was free to leave the Land of Promise and marry Tulchine, which she did, and they were happy. Dil's ox was happy too, loving Tulchine's plain, which was thereafter named for him as the Plain of Brega.

In many ways, the faery world mirrored the mortal world. Faeries tended livestock and could fall in love, just like mortals. They could even fall in love with mortals and leave their immortal realm to be with them. While this story is traditionally accepted as a mortal man bringing a faery woman and her ox out of the immortal world, it may also be a story of an Irish man falling in love with a foreign woman who craved a key comfort from home. In remembering that cattle were the key currency of the age, the symbol of the ox grazing happily on the new plain may signify a dowry or the prosperity wrought by the joining of two households. As a faery ox, the animal may have had special gifts provided through ploughing and grazing upon the land, perhaps increasing the land's fertility and production.

Tulchine petitions the Morrigan as a goddess, but because the Morrigan has the power to release Dil's ox from a faeryland, we see her power over both the mortal and faery worlds. Both faeries and goddesses may be cunning and tricky, but in this myth we learn that they can also be kind. The Morrigan performs a purely benevolent act by not asking for anything from Tulchine in exchange for releasing the ox. Contemporary devotees suggest that the Morrigan acts out of contract, not kindness, demanding an offering in exchange for her assistance. I have found this is true with nearly all Pagan deities. Yet there are never absolutes with faeries or the Morrigan. Just as faeries might extend kindness for kindness's sake, the Morrigan can offer blessings solely because she feels moved to do so.

But this benevolence is never a guarantee. Dil and Tulchine's story hints that the Morrigan grants assistance with love and

reunion matters. (“If the Morrigan was good to Tulchine and helped him marry Dil, maybe I’ll pray to the Morrigan to help me get back together with my ex!”) It’s a reasonable assumption. It might even work. But it’s important to remember one key note in this myth: Tulchine did not ask the Morrigan for help securing a marriage to Dil. He asked only that her ox be allowed to graze on the plain, essentially asking for a change in circumstances. Just as in the First Battle of Mag Tuired, the Morrigan did not deliver victory directly to the Tuatha Dé—the Morrigan changed the circumstances so that victory would be attainable. The Tuatha Dé still had to win the battle, and Dil still had to agree to marry Tulchine. The Morrigan may change circumstances so that our desires are within reach, but we will still need to finish the work to attain them.

The Story of Odras

Tulchine was indeed blessed by the Morrigan. But not all characters who encountered her were so lucky. In the Story of Odras, the Morrigan curses with an angry faery’s might. This is an adaptation of the original myth.¹⁷

The noble Odras was a lady of the land. She was mighty and good, radiant and danger loving, fair and shapely, and married to Buchat, the Lord of Cattle for the high king. Buchat roused his herd quite early each day. One morning, Odras followed him to watch the sweet-fleshed cattle but fell asleep. The Morrigan, wife of the Dagda, fierce of mood, the cunning raven-caller, came along while the lady slept and took a bull from the herd—a wild and savage creature, unmastered and strong. She quickly escorted the bull away so that he would mate with a cow of the Morrigan’s choosing. Odras woke and realized what the Morrigan had done. She gathered her weapons and pursued the Queen to reclaim the bull, trailing her to Cruachan, the faery mound. But once again she fell asleep. It was then that the Morrigan emerged from the cave at Cruachan, furious when she saw Odras sleeping. Buchat, from far away, chanted every spell of power he had. But the Morrigan was crafty and turned his wife Odras into a sleepy stream that became the river named

for the unlucky visitor near the Sid mounds.

The moral of this tale may be about respecting boundaries and minding one's own business. It also may be a warning against visiting faery mounds. Odras is described as good, radiant, and fair, but also danger loving, and this is her downfall. The Morrigan is described as "fierce of mood," which may mean either determined or angry—or both. She takes a bull to mate with one of her cows, which evokes faeries stealing dairy products. Perhaps as one of the faery gentry, the Morrigan wouldn't stoop to simply steal milk, but feel entitled to the entire mechanism for producing it. It also highlights the Morrigan's power and might, given that leading a bull is no simple task. Odras is moved to action because the bull belongs to her husband, but it is in trying to stop the Morrigan that she falls into trouble. Just as the Irish were careful not to disturb the faeries while they danced on Samhain Eve, Odras puts herself in danger by interrupting the Great Faery while she is at task. As punishment, the Morrigan turns her into a sleepy stream. Recalling that streams, rivers, and other water sources were closely associated with the faery world, this curse speaks to the Morrigan's faery nature. It may even be that Buchat himself was a faery, knowing his wife was in trouble while he was far away and chanting to assist her. This story may describe a battle within the faery world.

Perhaps the Morrigan created a web of enchantment, which made Odras sleepy. It also may be that the faery and dreamtime worlds overlapped. Other lessons from this myth include awareness, first through falling asleep while on duty and then pursuing the Queen without being aware of where she was going, ending up in faery territory. The Morrigan curses Odras not only for intruding on her work, but for being unaware. Maybe this was a story told to warn young women against straying too far from home or neglecting their duties. The Morrigan's taking of the bull may indicate her dominion over living creatures and may not have been true theft. If so, her anger at Odras does not equal cruelty but rather irritation at being undermined. It's possible this myth hints at a societal structure in Celtic Ireland, in which regal parties could take what they wanted from whomever they chose. It may also indicate a lesson about not interfering with the natural order of the environment. It's certainly a story warning of the power of the

faeries.

We don't need to think of this myth as a warning against working with the Morrigan. But it may be a warning against making petulant demands of the Morrigan. Is it okay to ask for blessings? Sure! But if things aren't going our way and we continue to make demands like a toddler, the sisters may freeze our endeavors completely. This is simply one interpretation. Your experiences and insights may tell you something very different. Maybe the Morrigan simply didn't like Odras . . . but maybe she does like you.

The Debility of the Ulstermen

In this myth, Macha embodies the traditional role of the selkie, a faery woman of the ocean (frequently one who takes the form of a seal when in the water) who marries a mortal man for a time until a misstep on his part sends her back to the sea. This is a story in which Macha experiences death—but instead of a return to the sea, Macha weaves a great curse that affects the men of Ulster for many myths to follow.¹⁸

High in the solitudes of the hills of Ulster lived a cow lord named Crunniuc, who had become quite wealthy as his years advanced. For many years, he had lived as a widower. One day, a woman, magnificent in appearance, dress, and demeanor, approached his home. Without a word, she sat herself near the hearth and stirred the fire. She prepared dinner, gave instructions to the servants, and milked the cows. That night, she shared Crunniuc's bed, and for many years she was an excellent wife. While she was with Crunniuc, he became even wealthier. The household never wanted for food or good or drink.

The woman became pregnant with twins. Close to the time she should give birth, a great fair convened not far from where they lived. Crunniuc, looking handsome and well because of his fortune's growth, wanted to attend.

"Be careful," said his wife. "If you speak of me at this fair, our marriage will not continue."

Crunniuc promised discretion and departed. It was a

brilliant event, with people from across the land dressed in beautiful costumes. All gathered to see the horses race. At the end of the day, the king's chariot, pulled by the king's two great horses, won the greatest race of the day. The bards, druids, poets, and others cried out, "There is not a swifter pair of horses in all of Ireland!"

"None swifter than my wife!" Crunniuc called out.

The king heard the boast. "Seize the man and bring forth his wife!" he demanded. "She will race my horses and prove she is swifter!" Crunniuc was imprisoned and messengers ran to the hills, demanding that Crunnicu's wife attend the fair.

"I am close to giving birth. I cannot attend," said the wife to the messengers.

"This is a shame," said the messengers. "If you do not attend, your husband will be put to death."

Moved out of concern for her husband, the wife agreed to go. When she reached the fair, her birthing pains had begun. "It is not right that I should be on display in this condition," she lamented to the people gathered around. "Why have I been brought here?"

"To race against the two horses of the king!" shouted the crowd.

"I cannot!" the wife cried. "I shall too soon be giving birth."

"Unsheath your swords," said the king to his men. "Chop the boasting man Crunniuc to death."

"Wait!" she cried, and turned to the people. "Help me. Each of you was born to a mother. Please allow me to give birth before performing this task." The king refused her request and the people demanded the race.

"Shame on you all," the wife wailed. "Because you have shown me no mercy, calamity will fall upon you."

"What is your name?" asked the king.

"I am Macha, daughter of Sainreth mac Imbaith—the Strange Son of Ocean. My name will forever remain on this place where we stand today. Bring the horses beside me!"

The horses were brought beside Macha and the race began.

True to Crunniuc's word, Macha outran the king's champions, arriving first at the end of the course. She gave a great cry of pain at the finishing line and gave birth to twins—a son and a daughter—before the king's horses could finish their run. All who heard her cry were seized with the pains of childbirth.

Macha, dying, cried out, “Because of the cruelty you have shown me today, I curse you with this: When troubles shall befall you, when you are raided by enemies, you will experience the weakness that I know today, and you shall experience it for five days and four nights, allowing your enemies to crush you in the way you have crushed me. This affliction begins today, and will last for nine generations.”

From that day, the place where the fair was held was called Emain Macha—the Twins of Macha—and this was the cause of the Debility of the Ulstermen.

In this story, we see glimpses of Macha as faery, with both her generous and formidable aspects. She becomes wife to a lonely man, bringing beauty and comfort to a cold, lonely home and helping it become bountiful in riches and children. She asks little in return—only her husband's discretion. Macha is benevolent and loving until the contract is broken.

The fair may represent an *óenach*—a regular assembly overseen by the local king, where all members of the tuath could conduct business and participate in games and horseracing. Whether he was caught up in the adrenaline of the race, had too much ale, or was simply terrible at keeping secrets, Crunniuc could not resist bragging about his wife. This put Macha in the excruciating position of having to choose between her own health and the safety of her spouse. She chose to race and it takes her life in the process, but she is still able to give life with her dying breath. Finally, her curse against the men of Ulster sets up a key circumstance for the pending *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (“The Cattle Raid of Cooley”).

This is another teaching tale. It urges humility. It warns against greed. Crunniuc was wealthy and his family was growing, yet he needed acclaim. It is also a warning against personal carelessness. It is through Crunniuc's carelessness that he loses her, either to

death or returning to the otherworld. A lesson from this story might be to not take for granted our resources or our relationships.

The story also warns against bragging about a faery encounter. Faery lore frequently includes tales of faeries punishing mortals who boast of having seen them. Macha's mortal husband makes this grave error when he, despite her warnings, boasts of his otherworldly wife's great powers. When he does so, Macha embraces an ancient tradition of the faery cursing a human with illness or death. Perhaps because she was also a goddess, she took things a step further and cursed an entire population of men (although we could reasonably assume faeries would have this power as well).

Lastly, this story warns against mob mentality. Macha pleaded for the people to show her compassion, but they shouted her down. It may call for compassion for the vulnerable and those forced into making painful decisions due to impossible circumstances. The story calls for slowing down and stepping back, and considering the person being affected by the demands of the powerful. Macha's curse is a reminder that when we don't show compassion for others, we endanger the world we leave for our descendants.

But this story offers more than a warning. There is promise in the tale. We will all go through times when things seem stacked against us—when we feel we do not have an ally in our time of need, or when we are faced with an impossible choice. Even if we feel we do not have a human we can trust, Macha may be the one sister who can empathize. It's certainly worth a try, even through a simple prayer.

THE FAERY MORRIGAN AND US

The beauty and madness of the Morrigan's stories lie in their ambiguity. The messages we see in them may reflect what lessons we need in that moment. One read a lifetime is not enough. When we return to the myths, we may find a new message waiting for us, offering the lesson we need at that time. The more I reflected on the Morrigan and faeries, the more I realized there is nothing about the Morrigan that is not of the faery. The Morrigan fights, loves, curses, blesses, and shape-shifts in the spirit and nature of the faeries. Does it even make sense to call her a war goddess? Or is the

Morrigan's warfaring simply part of the faery nature, knowing that faeries can go to war themselves? Should we be quick to label the Morrigan sisters as “goddesses of death,” or is her familiarity with the realm of the dead simply one more part of the faery territory?

The faery identity may be why devotees sometimes struggle to connect with the Morrigan. This aspect of the sisters' nature is constantly unknowable but, like humanity's longtime fascination with faeries, fully enchanting. Like the stories of mortals becoming lost in the faery world, the Morrigan can take devotees on strange journeys, aligning them with people and situations for a purpose we'll never fully understand. The faery Morrigan holds ancient memory. She urges us to respect natural places and those who are different from us. The faery sisters remind us to have compassion and act with humility. The faery Morrigan may take us into confusing situations. We may be pawns in a game we will never fully understand, but that again encourages us to decenter ourselves. *This world is not all about us.* At the same time, the faery nature of the Morrigan can be gracious. When they want to help, faeries are known for bringing aid quickly. If moved to do so, the Morrigan will assist in a timely manner, too, and will be good to those who approach her with sincerity and without ego. When she is good to us, it's in our best interest to offer sincere gratitude in return.

At the same time, the faery Morrigan may want us to approach her with a light heart. Contemporary Morrigan devotion tends to be heavy and dramatic, which makes sense to an extent. The sisters are heavy and dramatic goddesses! But my experience at the ritual taught me that the Morrigan does not want *only* serious faces and stern words. The faery nature of the Morrigan may want to have fun, too. The Morrigan typically responds in kind. Approach the sisters with joy and they are likely to return it.

RITUAL: WORKING WITH THE FAERY MORRIGAN

As was illustrated in my absurd tale of the pig statue, faeries are not always inclined to participate in solemn human rituals. While the Morrigan may enjoy a serious rite in certain occasions, when her faery self is at the wheel the results are unpredictable.

Meditations are equally tricky for similar reasons. Faeries would rather appear to us in their chosen form and on their own terms and aren't fond of being summoned. Yet, it is possible to build a positive relationship with the faeries and the faery Morrigan, too. Instead of formal ritual, consider doing the following:

- Leave an offering of milk, honey, or whiskey, or a combination of these, in your sacred space for the Morrigan. Alternatively, leave the offering outside, preferably by a tree or water source. Faeries are particularly fond of trees that grow over water. The Morrigan likes streams and rivers, especially ford areas where the water is low enough to cross safely without a bridge or boat. Badb is fond of lakes, and Macha likes the ocean. Do not pour milk on trees or plants, though, as they can develop a damaging fungus. Leave the milk in a bowl instead. After a day or so, it's fine to dispose of the offering at a crossroads or respectfully pour it down a drain. Leaving milk to curdle might sicken animals who drink it.
- Collect garbage. On my last trip to Ireland, my husband and I visited a faery mound with a friend. As we were trying to find our way, we three stumbled and slid into a ditch where we had not meant to go, only to find it was littered with cans, bottles, and plastic bags. The faeries wanted our cleanup skills more than our whiskey or milk.
- Participate in the old tradition of tying clouties (ribbons or strips of cloth) to a tree as a gift for the faeries. Make sure your clouties are made of cotton, wool, or some other natural fiber. Do not use plastic-based or polyester fabrics, as these can suffocate a tree's limbs. Do not stick coins, pins, or any kind of metal in a tree or hang metal objects (like a necklace chain) on a tree limb. Be mindful of nature when making your offer to the faery Morrigan.

The faeries, and the faery Morrigan, know what you're after when you approach them, but do have the intention clear in your mind. Whether you're looking for a healing, an insight, or simply to establish a better relationship with the fae, know that intention solidly before you make your offering. If it's helpful to say something, the following might be useful:

Morrigan, three, through the cave show me,
Badb of night, grant wisdom, not fright,
Macha, mother, strength and wonder,
Queens among the fae, accept my gift today.

Pay attention to your dreams in the days that follow. Observe a bedtime and stay away from stimulants or substances that might affect your sleep. The faeries often work through dreams, and the faery Morrigan is known to bring messages to respectful seekers while they sleep. Watch the wild animals near you as well. You may find that they'll lead you to earth, trees, or plants that need tending or healing. Listen carefully to conversations around you. You might overhear an exchange at the grocery store that provides an answer to something you've been puzzling over. Connect with others: pick up the phone, answer messages, accept coffee dates. Friends or colleagues just might offer you the assistance you need before you ask for it.

The faery Morrigan works in peculiar ways. Sometimes these ways are so subtle we risk missing them altogether. The need to slow down and watch is yet another gift of the faery Morrigan. When we take time to notice her gifts and blessings, we may notice other life treasures as well.

A Visit from Macha

I composed a hymn to the Morrigan in a very low time of my life when I was in between partners and very much alone in the core of my existence. I hoped that my life would blossom as a result. I spoke my hymn at Beltane and nothing happened. Nothing horrible happened to me, just nothing registered. Summer passed and I almost forgot about it. But as soon as we entered September and the year began to darken, everything began to happen. I went to a conference and was picked up by a magnificent dark-haired goth of a young woman who moved in with me. She was the most excellent

housemate, companion, and friend who completely rescued me from the doldrums, energized me to remake a fantastic social life, and then departed from me and my world after a few months, leaving me completely restored. She'd fulfilled exactly what I'd laid out in the hymn. I wondered if I could have a firmer confirmation, a sign that all this was connected. After I asked for this, I spoke at another conference in London. A pair of festival giants were placed at the end of the hall where everyone was speaking, one of which was the Morrigan. I found myself delivering my speech underneath this figure of the Morrigan—twenty feet high and gorgeous, with her dark eyes fixed on me, steadily, while I was speaking. And I thought, “Yes, that's a pretty good sign.”

—A well-known British Pagan writing as Edmund

CHAPTER 5

Goddess of Sovereignty



“Badb Catha” by Tamara Sulc

I know a man who calls on the Morrigan when he feels powerless. Another friend prays to the Morrigan for help navigating circumstances beyond her control. I have colleagues who seek out the Morrigan when they need power, and others who call on the sisters to dismantle power used to harm. In an era of societal push and pull, often over who has the right to exist, many devoted individuals summon the Morrigan's powers of sovereignty to help those facing oppression or displacement. But the gift of calling the

Morrigan is that no matter the reason for calling the sisters, they will show us the windows into our own strength. The Morrigan is not a rescue team and the sisters are not cheerleaders. The Morrigan rarely seems interested in solving mortal problems. Yet as goddesses of sovereignty, the Morrigan can help us find sovereignty in ourselves.

Sovereignty needn't come through confrontations with others or dramatic life changes. Finding sovereignty can come through battles we fight internally. I've fought my eating disorder for years. Oddly, the more I fought it, the worse it became. It's not just chronic dieting. It's an illness that wakes you at 3 a.m., feeling like mean worms are burrowing through your head, leaving wicked shapes in your mind. It's not that there are good days and bad days; there are wonderful moments, terrible moments, and worse than terrible moments. In the wonderful ones, I love myself and my shape. I am thankful for moving without pain, for the privilege of being young and healthy with access to nutritious food and exercise. Some hours are harder. Grocery stores feel like an attack, a plate of food a punishment, and I want to peel off my own skin. Sometimes, getting out of bed is achievable, but looking in the mirror is not. Sometimes, neither option feels feasible.

On one of those really bad nights, I went to my Morrigan altar and sat in the dark. I didn't know what she could offer me. I only knew that I needed help holding this, given that every time I tried to share the burden with someone else, the pain only got worse for me and for them. It seemed foolish for this to affect me this much. Either I was weak and trite, or I'd let hurtful people win. If I were stronger, if I were sovereign over me, I wouldn't be in the position where I was saying to the darkness, *Help. I can't find my way out.*

A voice in my heart so strong it was nearly audible said, *You don't have wounds. You have scars. Accept them. Accept the hurt done to you by others and yourself.*

I was frustrated with the message. I felt it was one I already knew. Many of my issues came from long years of experiencing bullying. I knew that kids who bully often don't know the hurt they cause, and hurtful comments from relatives can be well intended . . . Yes, yes, I'd accepted all of that. Hadn't I?

But then a memory montage rose in my mind, showing a new side to old, painful memories. I saw that every time I'd been

bullied but returned to school the next day instead of playing sick, I embraced sovereignty. I'd embraced sovereignty when boys at the pool groaned at the sight of me in a bathing suit, begging me to cover up . . . and I hadn't. Sovereignty was eating a full plate of dinner immediately after a relative had pointed out a fleshy roll on my prepubescent body. Even though I usually went to my room and scream-cried into a pillow after these incidents, blaming myself for the painful attention my body attracted, and eventually succumbing to undereating until my period stopped, I embodied sovereignty by simply continuing to be me. The acceptance the Morrigan spoke of was more than accepting the hurt that had fostered the disease. Acceptance was recognizing the sovereignty hidden in the painful moments.

The Morrigan showed me that sovereignty would never appear on a white horse and take me away from Eating Disorder Land. Sovereignty would come, and would keep coming, in small moments of holding myself up during the pain—standing strong in a million little battles. When I call upon the Morrigan, the battles don't get easier, but they get a little shorter each time.

The sisters don't rescue. But they are familiar with the most frightening things in our existence. They make friends with ghosts, of the dead and of our past pain. An entire army could not stop Cú Chulainn, but as we shall see, it is the Morrigan who stands up to him without fear, changing the circumstances to thwart him. She refuses to accept a submissive role. She triumphs.

There is no frightening thing that we face, within or outside of ourselves, that the Morrigan has not already conquered. The Morrigan may not solve the issues or defend us from trouble, but the Morrigan may show us the path to defending or rescuing ourselves.

Maybe that's the true definition of sovereignty.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF CELTIC WOMEN

Contemporary fiction set in the pre-Christian Celtic world, such as *The Mists of Avalon*, frequently depicts a matriarchal world, where a universal goddess was revered and women held power equal to, or greater than, men. Some of these depictions are so compelling that they are often mistaken for history or divine inspiration: a

supposed goddess-centered culture erased by modern patriarchy. In truth, Iron Age Celtic women may have enjoyed some liberties not permitted to the later medieval-era European women, or even their Continental contemporaries. Widows enjoyed certain protections, and Irish women could also hold roles as judges and lawyers. Given that Roman scribes described female magicians in Celtic Gaul, we may assume that Celtic women could become druidesses, the female priests of the religious caste. While Celtic queens were less common than kings, certain Celtic queens held immense power. The British Celtic queen Boudicca, for example, was legendary for her ruthless nature and for wreaking terror on the Romans. Even so, the reality of Celtic women was much likely bleaker than described in novels.

If early Irish tract laws offer any clues about Celtic Irish life, women were defined as “legally incompetent” and on par with slaves, children, and the insane. It is also believed that the Celts generally organized their societies through patriarchal lines. Property was bequeathed through male relatives. Men in good standing with their family's patriarchs would inherit more than those with fraught or distant relations. But no matter their standing, daughters might inherit a lifetime interest in their father's land if they had no brothers, but could not inherit formally.¹ Women with possession of land could not bequeath it to anyone; their property was usually returned to their tuath at their death. Polygamy was common among wealthier Irish, but concubines were considered of lesser value than the chief wife. An Irish man could divorce his wife for a variety of reasons including infertility, abortion, infidelity, child killing, or being a “slattern” about the house, while Irish women had a narrower list of acceptable reasons for divorce, some of which included impotence, homosexuality, violence, or “blabbing about what happened under the blankets.” A divorced woman might even receive compensation—a far cry from the restrictions on Celtic women in Continental Europe, who could be drowned in a cesspit for even attempting divorce.² Despite being a culture with goddess-oriented spiritual beliefs, this was not a haven for women's rights.

Was the Morrigan an anomaly? Was she a beacon of aspiration for women in an unequal society? Did women tell stories of the Morrigan sisters to their daughters, encouraging strength in a culture that did not afford them equality? In the Morrigan's myths,

the sisters consistently challenge the authority of men. As we witnessed earlier, they drove enemy armies to madness; Badb terrified powerful men with visions of their deaths; and the Morrigan could command kings. In a story we will explore in [chapter 6](#), Macha claims a kingship, a story that may be based on a historic queen who ruled all of Ireland in 377 BCE.³

The Morrigan's roles in the epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (“The Cattle Raid of Cooley”) and its prequel, *Táin Bó Regamna* (“The Cattle Raid of the Important Calf”), challenge male-dominated leadership. Along the way, her personal sovereignty is challenged because of her gender identity. These stories focus on a major question: Who controls the wealth and power? In these myths, the Morrigan not only demonstrates her own sovereignty, but also challenges those who wield theirs over others and roles assigned for women. It was the men's task to steal the cattle, and the women's task to cheer or taunt them. But as we shall see, the Morrigan breaks this norm.

TÁIN BÓ REGAMNA (“THE CATTLE RAID OF THE IMPORTANT CALF”)

Cú Chulainn returns as the central star of the two cattle-raiding epics. He overcomes many foes, but is consistently thwarted by the Morrigan. This telling has been shortened and adapted.⁴

Cú Chulainn was awakened by the sound of cattle roaring and ran naked into the yard, his wife following with his clothes. He and his friend Laeg raced toward the sound, where they found a strange sight: a chariot pulled by a single red horse with a single leg. The shaft of the chariot extended through the horse to the front of its forehead. Sitting in the chariot was a red-haired woman with red eyebrows, wearing a red cloak that draped down the back of the chariot, dragging on the ground behind her. Seated next to her was a big man in a tunic carrying a forked white hazel stick, which he used to drive a cow. Immediately, Cú Chulainn prevented the couple from moving forward.

“The cow is not pleased with her driving,” said Cú Chulainn.

“It is not your place to judge this cow,” said the red

woman. "It does not belong to you, your friend, or any companion of yours."

"The cows of all Ulstermen are my responsibility," said Cú Chulainn.

"You decide much, Cú Chulainn," said the woman.

"Why is the woman speaking to me?" said Cú Chulainn. "Why isn't the man speaking?"

"It was not the man you shouted at," the woman replied.

"Ha!" said the hero. "So you must speak for him? He cannot speak for himself?"

"Cold Wind Conflict Brightness Strife is his name," said the woman.

Cú Chulainn laughed. "And a lovely name that is. I see you will be speaking for your man. Be that the case, what might your name be?"

The man said, "The woman you are speaking to is Keen-Edged Small-Lipped Plain-Cloaked Hair-Sharp Shouting-Fierceness Phantom."

Cú Chulainn became angry. "Do you think I'm an idiot?" He leapt into the chariot, squatting on the woman's knees and pointing his javelin at the crown of her head. "Do you know who I am?"

"A small man, I believe," she said. "I am a woman satirist. This cow is my payment for a poem I delivered."

"Then I shall hear the poem, now," said Cú Chulainn.

The woman laughed. "It is but a little poem, not manly enough for the like of someone brandishing a weapon over my head."

Cú Chulainn stepped down and stood before the chariot so that she could not drive away, and then the woman began the poem:

"A man of low-born foundation,

Grabs a herd of cattle and drives them eastward,

Where he finds great misery and his tombstone in quite a hurry.

The Raven is fierce, but not for him,

Amongst the great floods,
He finds his peak of fame and a unique death,
On the plain of Sainb every heart and head
Faces world-warring judgment and the fields shall be
severed.

Your life is a bright wild place, but runs deep with deceit.
This poet demands, and this Síd mound's messenger, too,
Your path shall burn on the Cúailnge,
O, Cú Chulainn . . .”

Cú Chulainn sprang into his own chariot when the woman finished her poem, ready to rush the couple and fight. But there was nothing of them at all. Man, woman, and cow had all vanished. But then he saw that the woman had morphed into a black bird perched on a branch near him.

“A hurtful woman, you are,” said Cú Chulainn.

“Distress shall be on this bog until doomsday,” said the woman who was now a bird, and from that day the place was known as the Bog of Distress.

“If I had known it was you, you would not have had the chance to hide as a bird,” said Cú Chulainn.

“Whatever you would have done would have brought you only misfortune,” she replied.

“You cannot bring misfortune on me,” said Cú Chulainn.

“I certainly can,” said the woman. “I can bring about your death and I shall. I brought that cow from the faery mound of Cruachan so that she could be mounted by the great Brown Bull. I will let you live only until the calf in her womb is a young bull, which shall stir up the Cattle Raid of Cúailnge.”

“I will be a great champion in this cattle raid,” said Cú Chulainn. “I will kill their champions and defeat them in their great battles. And I will survive it all.”

“How will you do this?” she asked. “You will come to combat with a man of similar strength and form, similar skill, quickness, alertness, greatness, and a tribe with similar weapons. I will become an eel who will twist about your feet

in the ford and create greatly unfair odds against you.”

“I swear to the god of the Ulstermen,” said Cú Chulainn. “I will kick you against the blue-gray stones of the ford, and you will never heal from the wounds until doomsday unless you ask for my forgiveness.”

“I shall be a wolf-bitch against you, and I will strip the flesh from your right wrist up to your left forearm,” she replied.

“I will come at you with my dart until your eye bursts in your head and there will be no cure for you until doomsday until you ask my forgiveness, he replied.”

“I will become a white heifer with red ears,” she said. “And I will come in the water in a place of the ford, while you are at combat with a man as skilled as you. A hundred red-eared white cows will follow me and disadvantage your fight. Your very head will be taken off you at that ford.”

“I swear by other gods, I will throw a cast out of my sling at you and break your leg with it, and there will be no cure for you until doomsday if you do not ask my forgiveness.”

The two separated, Cú Chulainn going home to his wife and the Morrigan, with her cow, going to the faery hill of Cruachan in Connacht.

Among many things, this story is about power and who has the right to control an area's resources. Cú Chulainn believes he has authority over all cattle in the region, and criticizes how the Morrigan and her consort (who is thought to be the Dagda) handle the cow. She immediately counters that the cow does not belong to Cú Chulainn, despite his claims of authority. He's also annoyed that the woman is doing the talking, rather than the man. The names “Cold Wind Conflict Brightness Strife” and “Keen-Edged Small-Lipped Plain-Cloaked Hair-Sharp Shouting-Fierceness Phantom” irritate Cú Chulainn further. While we may no longer have the context for what these names meant to the Celtic Irish, they likely reveal that the couple are otherworldly beings with the power to terrorize, potentially with natural forces. Cú Chulainn either doesn't believe they are who they say they are, or he is annoyed by names that sound like a riddle. Perhaps he thinks the two meant to trick

him into stepping aside. The Morrigan, however, dismisses his indignance and insults him again, also claiming her role as a satirist and claiming that the cow is, by right, hers. On Cú Chulainn's insistence, she utilizes her role as a death herald by reciting her poem, a piece which points out his deceptive nature and prophesizes a tragic downfall—death at the peak of his fame—and claims that she will be one of his enemies.

Furious, Cú Chulainn attempts to attack the couple but finds that they have vanished. Noticing the woman has become a bird above him, he suddenly realizes whom he had been dealing with all along. His quote, “If I had known it was you, you would not have had the chance to hide as a bird,” suggests that this is not the first time the Morrigan and Cú Chulainn have quarreled. Perhaps because she too is angry, the Morrigan curses the bog where they stand. She prophesizes his death one more time, and the two exchange threats. At the end of the story, the Morrigan takes her cow to the faery hill to complete her work.

The Morrigan is fierce in this appearance. The one-legged horse is a frightening image, and she is dressed all in red, with hair and eyebrows to match. Remembering that red was symbolic of death to the Irish Celts, it's possible that her entire appearance in this story is an omen symbolizing the cattle raid to follow and Cú Chulainn's eventual death. She may be doing Badb's work of warning powerful men who misuse their power. Then again, the Morrigan's curses in this story could be retaliation at Cú Chulainn for interrupting her work and disrespecting her, or she could simply find him arrogant. Cú Chulainn's own anger may come from being unused to a challenge to his authority, particularly by a woman.

The Morrigan's claim of being a satirist is important. For the Irish Celts, satirists had a deeper, spiritual connotation. Poems composed and recited by satirists may have been viewed as magical formulas. It's sometimes believed that the Celts composed cursing poems in elaborate ceremonies, in which the name of a specific victim would have had ceaseless repetition to effectively curse the victim.⁵ However, we must remember that many sensational things have been written about the Celts over the centuries, and we have little means to discover how much truth exists in these stories. The very notion of the cursing satirist may

itself be a myth. But whether these kinds of satirists are historical tradition or the fantasy of later generations, we see elements of it in the Morrigan's poem. Repeating Cú Chulainn's name at the end could indicate this sort of repetition, and his charge at the chariot may have been his attempt to stop it. As the cow was payment for the satirist Morrigan's work, it may be that someone else paid the Morrigan to curse Cú Chulainn. If someone employed her, she must have been revered as even more powerful than the legendary Cú Chulainn.

We can imagine ten thousand different interpretations of why the Morrigan drove the cow and cursed the hero, and what she did when she disappeared back into the faery mounds. But, true to the Morrigan, her motives remain elusive. What is clear is her sovereignty. Cú Chulainn tried to use his power to prevent her from moving forward with her endeavors, but she did not fight him. She did not have to. Although he threatened her with violence, she held her ground and laughed. In a world where men were in charge, the Morrigan challenged it by simply standing in her power.

This story reminds me of the now famous photo “Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge” by Jonathan Bachman, an image taken during a protest. It shows a young, slight African American woman standing in a flowing dress, her arms crossed, while two white men in riot gear rush toward her. She stands still, peacefully and bravely, fully in her own power—a power that seems to buckle the knees of the police rushing to arrest her. If you've not seen it, google it. For me, the story of the Morrigan and Cú Chulainn evokes the spirit of this breathtaking image. The officers had riot gear and weapons, just as Cú Chulainn wielded a spear at the Morrigan. Like the woman in the photo, the Morrigan demonstrated even greater strength by standing in her own power.

This is the sovereignty the Morrigan can help us find. We who are drawn to magick, and goddesses such as the Morrigan, may be reminded in this story that the greatest power comes from ourselves. The Morrigan reveals her sovereignty by turning into a bird, her signature form. The greatest act of sovereignty we can attain is standing in our own power, in our own signature forms, and it's often the greatest gift the Morrigan can provide.

TÁIN BÓ CÚAILNGE (“THE CATTLE RAID OF COOLEY”)

The *Táin* is a thick read, reminiscent of modern superhero stories in which one man alone—with supernatural powers and mysterious patronage—can protect his people from danger. The man is Cú Chulainn, fresh from the previous tangle with the Morrigan, defending the province of Ulster from the armies of Queen Medb.⁶

The myth begins with Queen Medb in bed with her husband Ailill. Ailill prides himself on having given Medb much through their marriage and imagines how grateful she must be to have such a wealthy partner. He suggests that the reason he married her was that she was the only woman reigning over a province. Medb reminds her royal husband that she brought plenty of riches to the marriage and never married him for power, as she never needed it. She also reminds her husband that she married him for “a strange bride price: a gift no woman before had asked of a man of Ireland: a husband without meanness, jealousy, or fear.” Medb's reasoning for requesting a husband who was not jealous is quickly obvious, as she would need to take many partners for the sake of her leadership, a political maneuver she will soon utilize.

The argument continues, and to prove their points the couple counts their riches and cattle. They discover they are equally wealthy, except for one great bull in Ailill's herd, which had been a calf of one of Medb's cows. Given Medb has no equal in this bull, and therefore her own claim to power is threatened, she sets out to rectify the situation, sending nine messengers to Dáire mac Fiachna to ask him to lend her the great bull Donn Cúailgne (the Brown Bull of Cúailgne), which is located in the province of Ulster, where the men still suffer labor pains in times of strife due to Macha's curse. This bull was the one that the Morrigan mated with her cow, and its calf may be the great bull belonging to Ailill. If Medb borrows the brown bull for one year, she will breed a new bull and match her husband in riches. She offers Dáire heifers, land, a chariot, and even herself in bed. When Dáire receives this offer from Medb's messengers he quickly agrees. However, the messengers get drunk that night and brag about their queen, claiming it's good that Dáire surrendered the bull because if he hadn't, the fierce Medb would have taken it anyway. Insulted,

Dáire rescinds his agreement and refuses to lend the bull.

Ailill and Medb assemble a great army to raid Cúailnge. Then, Medb receives a prophetic message from a young prophetess named Fedelm who acts in the role of Badb. The maiden, dressed in a red cloak and described with deeply red lips, prophesizes the destruction of Medb's army and claims a heroic young man will level Medb's army, alone. Medb dismisses this prophecy, as the Ulster warriors will be suffering their childbearing pangs during the attack and therefore, she believes, couldn't possibly be a threat to her. Medb's army sets out the Monday after Samhain. Shortly into their journey, Medb becomes suspicious of some of her soldiers and proposes killing them, but Ailill dissuades her. They compromise and she distributes the suspicious soldiers across the army so that they will be less of a threat to her.

Soon after, Nemain appears:

Thereupon, Nemain, the war-goddess, assailed them. The night was loud, and rest could not be found. The soldiers rose against one another, consumed with confusion, until Medb came to quiet them down.⁷

Was Nemain attacking Medb's army to prevent them from entering Ulster? Was Nemain on the side of Dáire? Or was she simply being a supportive sister of the Morrigan, trying to take out Medb's army before Cú Chulainn could, robbing him of the glory? It's also possible that Nemain was an embodiment of the confusion that might arise in an army of strangers.

Medb's army then runs into a series of traps left by Cú Chulainn, which impede their progress. It is at this point that Ailill and Medb hear the tales of Cú Chulainn. The tale then delves into Cú Chulainn's boyhood story, including a tale in which Badb taunted him in battle.

After some fierce fighting, Cú Chulainn searched the battlefield for his wounded beloveds. He came across a man with half a head carrying half a corpse on his back, who asked his help in carrying the dead body. When Cú Chulainn refused to help, the two fight:

Cú Chulainn heard Badb from among the corpses cry out, "It is a poor warrior indeed who is defeated by ghosts!" Cú

Chulainn then knocked the half-head off the opponent and drove his head like a ball across the plain.⁸

In this passage, Badb participates in the Celtic practice of women taunting fleeing warriors. But was Badb on the side of the ghosts, mocking an opponent, or was her taunting meant to galvanize the living hero to fight harder? Either way, this story suggests that the Morrigan sisters were with Cú Chulainn from the time he was a child. Being a great warrior, he would require a great war goddess as his patron. While the Morrigan may represent a guardian or patron goddess to Cú Chulainn, he routinely rebels against her. She may also represent a force within Cú Chulainn that he struggles to reconcile, perhaps with his own sovereignty. Cú Chulainn may also resent the Morrigan sisters because they are the only opponents he can never defeat. They are both allies and adversaries: a challenge to face, one he cannot escape, and one he will constantly despise. Then again, what is sovereignty without a challenge to it? As the myths illustrate and perhaps as we have discovered, sovereignty is not resting in power, but continually maintaining it.

Meanwhile, Cú Chulainn creates more obstacles for Medb's army, killing off another of her greatest fighters. Medb scolds the entire army for not killing Cú Chulainn sooner. Meanwhile, the Morrigan visits the bull they seek:

The Morrigan, in the form of a black bird, descended onto a standing stone and said to the Bull:

“Has the Bull heard the tale?

I have a secret the Bull shall know if he grazes on the green grass . . .

Great bull, are you nervous? Do you wonder if they will bring death to all?

The wise raven bemoans that enemies infest the peaceful pastures,

Ravaging as they go.

Learn, I will tell you,

They will gently bare their necks,

Among the green grass and the beautiful blossoms,

While on the plains, war will grind heroes to dust,

Cattle groan at the sight of the Badb,
Her raven feasting upon corpses of men,
Sickness and sorrow and violence everlasting,
Raging over Cúailgne, their sons shall perish,
Death of whole families . . .
Death, death!"

The bull moved away with his heifers and herdsman, throwing off the three times fifty boys playing on his back and killing two-thirds of them. His fleeing hooves tore a trench through the land, tossing the earth wherever he went.⁹

The Morrigan, armed with knowledge of the advancing armies, warns the coveted bull about the troubles to come. Although her message is of violence, she approaches in a gentler form of the black bird than her previous potent red. While there is nothing comforting about the Morrigan's message to the bull, it is helpful. If personal sovereignty includes choice for one's future, she has granted this to the bull through offering this foreknowledge, which gives the bull time to escape to a different pasture and delay the raid.

While the description of the boys playing on the back of the bull may first suggest the enormity of his size, it may have deeper implications. It may symbolize deaths due to cattle raiding. The bull symbolizes strength, but also fertility and virility. Shaking and killing youths clinging to him may suggest illness befalling a community. When the fertile bull can no longer support the community, many will suffer. It may also be a sign that the Celts knew that although humanity can "hold on" to the resources of the earth, they can never fully control them. This section of the *Táin* may represent the earth's ultimate sovereignty.

The bull's move to a different pasture slows Medb's army. When a small envoy finally catches the bull, he attacks, killing key members of the battalion. While this is happening, Cú Chulainn continues to harass the main body of Medb's army, through both weapons and disguise. He fights man-to-man with yet another of her finest warriors; and while Cú Chulainn doesn't kill him, he leaves him permanently injured. It was after this battle that Cú

Chulainn meets the Morrigan in one of their most famous encounters:

Then, Cú Chulainn came upon a beautiful and regal young woman, wearing clothes of many colors. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am the daughter of King Buan," she replied. "I have brought you my cattle and other riches. I have heard the great tales of you, and have fallen in love with you."

"Your timing is poor," he said. "My fellow warriors struggle and starve. I have no time for a woman, now."

"I may be of help to you," the woman replied.

"I am not here for a woman's ass!" Cu Chulainn insisted.

"Then I will hinder you," she said. "When you are in the thick of your fight, I'll make myself into an eel, curl under your feet, and trip you in the ford."

"I'm more likely to believe you are an eel than believe you to be a king's daughter. If you become an eel, I will crack your ribs with my toes, and you will carry this injury forever unless I lift the mark with my blessing."

"Then I will turn into a grey she-wolf and chase cattle into the ford against you," she said.

"Then I'll hurl a sling-stone and burst your eye, and you'll be missing an eye forever unless I lift it from you with a blessing."

"I'll make myself into a hornless red heifer and will lead the cattle to run over you in the ford and you will not know me at all," she said.

"Then I'll hurl a stone and break your legs," he said. "And they will never heal unless I offer a blessing."

Then, she left him.¹⁰

When I first read this, I put down the book and walked away until I was no longer raging. I felt the Morrigan's fury as I have in every meeting, debate, or discussion in which my contributions were whittled down to "a woman's emotions," or my being friendly or collegiate with a man was misconstrued as romantic interest.

Like the Morrigan, sometimes I have felt as though I were dismissed because of my gender identity. It's a kind of anger that's driven me to be better and stronger, and like the Morrigan, it has sometimes created more opposition than allies.

It's often suggested that the Morrigan wants revenge because Cú Chulainn rejected her advances, but marriage in the Celtic era was less about love and more about unifying forces. Medb and Ailill compare riches, noting that they came together to be a force of power. A woman's body could be part of her contract, and in many cases, such as that of Medb offering herself in exchange for the Brown Bull, it could be a powerful bargaining chip. The Morrigan is likely less interested in Cú Chulainn's love and affection and more interested in his power and gifts for her own purposes. She offers assistance in addition to affection, but Cú Chulainn cannot imagine her as anything but a bedfellow. She may not be angry because of a bruised ego, but because Cú Chulainn would not hear her offer, whittling her down to nothing but her gender identity, which not only insults her but thwarts her plans.

At the same time, this entire encounter may be the Morrigan making good on the curse she spoke of in the *Táin Bó Regamna*. Both may be visions of Cú Chulainn's future troubles, in which he nearly loses his own strength and sovereignty.

The Morrigan doesn't spend much time trying to convince Cú Chulainn to accept her. Because he turned down her assistance, she becomes his adversary. She establishes herself as formidable competition, the rejection becoming fuel for her endeavors. Indeed, shortly thereafter in the story, Cú Chulainn experiences the Morrigan's revenge. While he fights in a ford, an eel wraps itself around his feet. True to his own word, he smashes the eel's ribs. Then, as the Morrigan promised, cattle stampede the ford, carrying off the other warriors' tents on their horns. A she-wolf (we can assume this is also the Morrigan) attacks Cú Chulainn and drives the cattle back to him. He slings a stone and bursts her eye. The Morrigan then shifts into the form of a hornless red heifer, leading the cattle through the ford as Cú Chulainn cries out, "I can't tell ford from flood!"

The Morrigan's curse is fulfilled, as is Cú Chulainn's, who slings a stone at the heifer and breaks her leg. After the combat, Cú Chulainn is weak from fighting, but the Morrigan heals him, an

encounter we'll explore in [chapter 7](#). At this point in the story, Ailill, Medb, and Cú Chulainn are open to peace talks, but these talks quickly fall apart. Cú Chulainn, perhaps inadvertently, summons Nemain again:

He shook his weapons, and let out a warrior's scream so terrifying that demons and devils and goblins of the glen and terrors of the air replied. Then, Nemain stirred the armies to confusion. The weapons of the four provinces shook with panic and one hundred warriors fell dead, so frightened were they of the screams of Cú Chulainn and the work of Nemain.^{[11](#)}

Although both sides seem weary, Cú Chulainn perseveres in defending his province, invoking the name of Badb several times toward the end. Finally, while the two sides sleep in their camps, the Morrigan stands in the “half-light between the two camps” and speaks once more:

“Ravens chewing at the necks of warriors
Blood spurting in the horrendous battle,
Hacked flesh, and men mad from battle,
Blades slicing through bodies in these acts of war,
After the cloaked one's heroic feat,
While in the shape of a man,
He shakes to pieces all the men of Cruachan,
More hacking blows as more war is waged,
Both sides trampling the other,
Hail Ulster! Woe men of Ireland!
Woe to Ulster! Hail men of Ireland.”

But the last “woe to Ulster” she said in earshot of only the men of Connacht to hide the truth from them. That same night, Nemain and the Badb called out to the men of Ireland and a hundred warriors died of fright. It was a bad night for all.^{[12](#)}

The Morrigan begins this passage by evoking a role akin to the one she played in the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, mentioning the wounds of war on both sides. It's not clear whether the cloaked one doing so much damage to the warriors is meant to represent Cú Chulainn, or if this is another symbol of death—perhaps of a deity or other spirit lost to time and translation. However, at the last minute she whispers a prophecy to the men of Connacht. This piece may be a knowledge of the future or a whispered incantation to bring about the Ulstermen's demise.

The fighting continues with even the kings of Ulster joining in, for their labor pains have ended. On the day after the battle, the Brown Bull of Cúailgne meets Finnbennach, the white-horned bull. The two bulls fight, running across all of Ireland throughout the night. The Brown Bull kills Finnbennach, then falls dead himself. The story ends with Ailill and Medb making peace with Cú Chulainn and Ulster, and the two armies go back to their respective provinces, peace declared across the land. For seven years after the final battle, none of their people were killed in Ireland.

The story of the *Táin* follows Queen Medb's quest for sovereignty for both Ireland and within her marriage, and Cú Chulainn's fight within himself. They both have many gains and losses. All the while, the Morrigan shifts the players of this battle around for her own unknowable desires. Perhaps the fighting and death of the bulls makes a mockery of the battle the men have fought, how many lives they have lost, for their own ego and pride. The Morrigan nudged them through these adventures, just to stand back and watch it all fall apart in the end. Yet even so, peace is declared. Could peace have been the Morrigan's ultimate objective? We will never know.

However, when we look at the Morrigan as a land goddess in [chapter 7](#), the ultimate sovereign, her work in this epic makes even more sense.

THE MYTHS AND THE MORRIGAN

The Morrigan breaks roles and assumptions set for her. In this case, the roles are about her gender identity in that she is a female figure employing stereotypically male activities such as cattle raiding,

threatening one-on-one combat, and even engaging in combat herself. The Morrigan does not accept a condescending tone, nor does she apologize for who she is or what she does. She does not suffer arrogance. She does not submit to a man simply because he is a man. She has no mercy when she is insulted and finds multiple ways to right the wrongs she has suffered. Her work is important to her, and she seeks no one's permission or approval before doing it. But she does not break rules simply for the sake of breaking them, although she questions their validity. As she did with Cú Chulainn's claim of controlling all cattle in Ulster, the Morrigan is not afraid to speak truth to power. While her reputation is often seasoned in slaughter, her sovereignty in these myths comes from standing her ground when challenged and changing the circumstances to suit her desires.

RITUAL: EMBRACING THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE MORRIGAN

Begin by taking time with the Morrigan, either at an altar you've created for the sisters or in a natural space, preferably by a running water source (such as a river or a creek). Reflect on the things about yourself that you may not like as much or are ashamed of. (For example, are you being critical of others? Are you stealing? Have you been lying to cover your own mistakes?) Try to acknowledge these things in a nonjudgmental way, simply noticing them as actions or mistakes (we all make mistakes), and not character flaws.

With closed eyes, envision yourself settling into a big, black feather as large as a hammock. Imagine that feather floating downward in a circular motion, through a dark tunnel shooting straight down into the earth.

Eventually, you come to rest in a cave: cold, dark, and quiet. Step off the feather and allow it to change shape. It may turn into the form of a sister (or sisters). It may simply vanish. It may remain a feather.

Most often, our hurtful actions are rooted in our own fears. Just before you feel comfortable in this space, say, "Show me the fear." Wait for the revelation, and be open and accepting when it appears.

If you have been criticizing others, you may find a critical voice you heard as a child, which may link to a fear of being unloved if you don't "measure up." If you've been stealing, you may find a fear of being without. If you've been lying, you may find a fear of others knowing the truth, which may be rooted to a fear of rejection. Most of our fears link to very human, primal needs such as being accepted, fed, sheltered, and protected by our tribe.

What does that fear look like? Is it a small child? An injured animal? Is it a mess of shapes and colors? Whatever it is, embrace it and hug it, love it, squeeze it. Fear doesn't have to be eliminated. Fear can inform us and keep us safe, but fear is problematic when it causes us to harm others or ourselves. By loving the fear, you begin to take sovereignty over it rather than letting it have sovereignty over you.

Next, turn to the form the feather took—the sister(s), the animal, or simply staying as the feather. Ask it to show you the steps to sovereignty over that which holds you back or harms you or others.

Listen to the words the Morrigan has for you, in whatever form she or they have taken.

You may not hear anything in the moment. That is fine. As always, the Queen of Nightmares may show you things in a dream or other revelation of things to come (and those dreams may not necessarily be frightening). The Morrigan works on her own time, but she pays in kind.

When you are finished with your meditation, make an offering to the Morrigan in the way you would honor an important person who has come to visit you: a cup of your best coffee, your greatest attempt at singing a song or painting a picture, or a collection of the most beautiful dandelions from your yard or local park.

Alternatively, if your need for sovereignty is over another person who has disempowered you, perform the same rite but instead of visualizing the part of yourself, visualize that person. The Morrigan will show you where they are weak and you are strong, followed by what steps you can take to reclaim your personal power. In some cases, that might mean removing them from your life.

We don't just wake one day and find that we're sovereign over ourselves. Sovereignty is a practice, not an item to check off the to-do list of life. Some moments will be better than others. We must

be patient with ourselves and take each moment at a time, noting clues from the Morrigan along the way, even if they are faint or cryptic.

Things Seemed Fine . . . and Then the Morrigan Came

I had a baby and a husband. We were the happy family, the one our friend group looked up to. Except that we weren't. One day, it all felt fake. My motherhood felt real, but the life built around it was not. I reached a point of mania, doing things like running into the woods during a rainstorm, covering myself in mud and just lying in it. One night, I realized there were areas of the house I couldn't enter without feeling ill. That's when I realized something was really wrong. This was my hearth, my sanctuary. How could I not enter areas of my own home? I wanted help but didn't know where to find it. My grandmothers had both died and my mother was far away; I didn't have matriarchs to guide me through this situation. I called upon the Morrigan in a desperate moment on a new moon, in my front yard, on my knees.

It was a spontaneous ritual, most of it occurring more within me than in words. It was late at night. My son was asleep. I went outside, alone, with a lantern and knelt at the base of my rose garden and made an offering of herbs. I said, "I completely surrender myself to you if you can bring me change, because I cannot live like this."

In maybe twenty-four hours, my world was completely different. I was aware of every moment I was pretending. I couldn't make my body perform the old routine. I could no longer cater to everyone's needs and ignore my own. Almost all of my relationships slipped away, except the one with my son. To the outside world, it looked like I was having a breakdown.

When my husband finally asked me about it, all I could say was truth. I was unhappy. I'd been a mother since I was a child, and I needed freedom to explore parts of myself that I hadn't yet. His response was, "You will not change. I married you this way. You will stay the same as you are, forever." I had never heard anything like that from him before. I don't think I would have seen the truth of my situation, nor had the courage to leave my marriage, had I not surrendered to the Morrigan.

She showed me the truth by showing me my own flaws and mistakes, and that I needed freedom. She blew open a door for change, but change doesn't come without pain. The several years after that were catastrophic, but necessary. I wasn't me before, but I am me now.

—Megan Flanagan Henslee

CHAPTER 6

The Shape-Shifting Goddess



“MÓR RÍOGHAN—The Morrigan” by Jane Brideson

I struggled with understanding the shape-shifter Morrigan. While I found the stories fascinating, it was hard to personally relate to this aspect. Appearances of ravens, crows, cattle, or other Morrigan animals seemed to be spiritual signposts, affirmations or warnings—but I couldn't get a sense of the shifting itself.

One night, I lit a candle on my Morrigan altar and asked the sisters to show me the shape-shifter. Nothing happened in the moment, but the next day, a list of impactful persons in my field

was published. It was a widely read list, written by a male colleague. He'd not included me. I was devastated. My work must be subpar, I thought. Should I try a different line of work? In my mind, I imagined being old and obscure, my hard work forgotten. It wasn't just ego. Being listed would have been possible grounds for a promotion or raise, and my husband and I could have used the extra cash. But I hadn't made the cut. I was depressed for the rest of the day.

I've always struggled with letting others' opinions, especially men's opinions, be the barometer of my worth. On a different day, had I not gone to the Morrigan the night before, I would have looked hard at that list and tried to figure out how to be more like those people. Instead, something told me to *shift*.

I sat down with the list, studying it honestly and objectively. With a handful of exceptions, I had accomplished more than quite a few of the people listed. Instead of swallowing the disappointment and keeping silent, I scheduled a meeting with that colleague. Sitting across the table from him in the conference room, I didn't ask why he didn't include me. Instead, I said, "You missed someone." I listed the work I'd done in only the past year, and said that while I respected most of his choices, I should have been included. While he didn't immediately agree, he didn't disagree, either. He joked, "Well, maybe you should keep me more aware of your work!" I replied, "Or maybe you should pay more attention."

I shifted my mentality from "not good enough" to "*absolutely* good enough—just overlooked." I also shifted from silence and complicity to vocally supporting myself. The Morrigan shifts to change the course of events. I, too, shifted and changed the course of the conversation—most importantly, the conversation with myself.

THE SHAPE-SHIFTING MORRIGAN

Shape-shifting is one of the Morrigan's signature traits. As we saw in the last chapter, it's the Morrigan's shifting into a black bird that reveals her identity to Cú Chulainn. The sisters can shift into different human forms as well. Badb is frequently described as a hag, but she can shift into a beautiful, regal woman bedecked in

fine attire. After the Morrigan shifts into a bird to issue the warning to the Brown Bull, she shifts again into a lovely young woman, promising wealth and cattle to Cú Chulainn in exchange for devotion. She then shifts into an old woman with a three-teated milk cow, offering healing to the hero through its milk. Macha transforms herself into a leper to trap and overcome her enemies.

Witnessing the Morrigan's shape-shifting is often a poor omen. Then again, the very appearance of a Morrigan sister usually embodies a warning, whether she shifts or not. But it may be that the shape the Morrigan takes informs the fate of the person seeing her.

THE CELTS AND SHAPE-SHIFTING

Celtic mythology is thick with shape-shifters. Cú Chulainn shifts into a monstrosity, contorting his body into a scary form to unnerve his enemies. Other characters shift into animals to flee from enemies. Sometimes characters shift involuntarily, cursed to remain animals until the spell is broken. Divine shape-shifters were most often female, and were most likely to turn into birds when the change was voluntary. The character's ability to shape-shift denotes their power or reveals them as an otherworldly creature, perhaps one aligned with the *sídh*.

Shape-shifting might have been a symbolic description. Just as a modern hiker might say, "I saw the face of God in that bear!" the Celts may have interpreted similar encounters as meeting the gods. Shape-shifting might also have described a scene, particularly one of battle. Celtic warriors were said to be so immersed in the frenzy of battle that they could become "mad as dogs or wolves, biting into shields, or as strong as bears or bulls."¹ In one story I heard in County Kerry, the Tuatha Dé Danann were said to have shifted into yellow flowers, turning back into warriors to protect Ireland from invaders. In reality, warriors may have disguised themselves as animals or plant life. The Morrigan shifting into a bird may evoke women on the battlefield contorting their faces and shrieking. Over time, what might have been a sensational description of an actual circumstance became mythologized.

In many Pagan myths, goddesses are linked to natural earth cycles. A regal goddess who also shape-shifts may be naturally

connected to life, fertility, and death, particularly in the shift between becoming a young, beautiful girl and an ancient, hideous hag.² The often sexual nature of shape-shifting encounters may suggest the fertility of the earth, or the relationship between kings and the land. A shape-shifting goddess tricking a man out of his power or blessing him with riches may represent unpredictable elements of the harvest. The shift between a maiden and a hag may also represent the changing of the seasons. A goddess who shifts from a hag to a maiden may represent the bloom and hope of springtime, and a maiden to a hag the fading of summer to fall and winter. By these details, the Morrigan's ability to shape-shift may be connected to an origin as an earth goddess.

Although the Morrigan's rules are almost always followed by exceptions, the sisters tend to shift into human forms when they desire something and shift into animals when delivering a warning or attack. Perhaps, like the warriors becoming animal-like in the frenzy of battle, the Morrigan changes shape through her own fury—whether that fury is anger, passion, or even love. The choice of animal can indicate the Morrigan's motives and offer insight into enigmatic myths. If we view the meeting of Cú Chulainn and the Morrigan in the light of man and the land, we might interpret the calamities that later befall the hero as a warning against taking for granted an abundant harvest.

THE MORRIGAN AS BIRD

Often thought of as the raven, but usually referred to as a black bird, the Morrigan as bird is the deity's most iconic guise. This is her signature shape-shifting move, appearing in too many myths to list in one section.

Working with the Morrigan as Bird

The Morrigan as the bird is a symbol of her most natural self. When we call upon the Morrigan as bird, we are calling on the clearest, most direct aspect of the Morrigan. Likewise, we are also asking for the most authentic parts of ourselves to appear.

THE MORRIGAN AS CATTLE

Cattle's role to the Irish people was as complex as their relationship to the Morrigan. As we have learned, cattle were the currency of the time. But cattle were also regal and, it might even be argued, somewhat divine. Milk was considered a life-giving drink in cultures from northern Europe to India—a symbol of purity, as well as bounty and fertility. Milk and dairy work were typically women's roles, perhaps supporting the connection between cattle and goddesses.³ Utilitarian as well as religious, their milk and meat may have been consumed in kings' coronation ceremonies.

But cattle were vulnerable. Bad weather, disease, accidents, or inefficient dairy production could mean the difference between survival and starvation. Milk churning, a process for creating butter or cheese, was unpredictable. If cattle died or their products failed, the community would suffer greatly. Because of the crucial but also precarious role of cattle, a goddess connected to cattle would be petitioned for their protection, but also blamed for dairy failures. The Morrigan's shifting to a trampling heifer in the *Táin* may represent the powerful but also devastating effects cattle had on Celtic communities.

As contradictory and elusive as the Morrigan could be, her relationship with cattle kept her relatable. The Morrigan did not simply observe humans from afar. Her own work mirrored that of humans living in a cattle-centered culture. Perhaps it also makes sense that such a goddess could shift into a heifer. When we consider that cattle required protection but also produced invaluable resources, the Morrigan acts as both a protector and provider herself.

Yet, when she transforms into a heifer, it is as though blessings are being used against Cú Chulainn. Perhaps it symbolizes the hero being a victim of his own success. It may represent the earth goddess refusing to help him. The heifer is an animal of great strength. In that, the Morrigan's shape-shifting may also symbolize an increase in feminine power.

Working with the Morrigan as Cattle

We can call upon the Morrigan as cattle to nourish and provide. Just as cattle provided food, clothing, and commerce for the Celts, the Morrigan in cattle form is helpful when resources are running low. But just as the Celts conducted raids to increase their cattle,

we might experience a symbolic call to raid. This might mean pushing for a few more hours at work, arguing for a raise or a better grade, or making a few more phone calls to get an earlier appointment with the doctor. And as a herd of cattle requires tending, we ought to be prepared to tend these resources when they arrive, such as making accommodations for a new work schedule so that what we have gained does not wander away. We may also call upon the Morrigan as cattle when in need of a force bigger than ourselves (perhaps when we need backup).

While the energy of the cattle is strong and having the power of the herd will also be strong and powerful, we must remember that the Morrigan was injured (a broken leg caused by Cú Chulainn) while in the shape of the cattle, an injury that would not heal until the hero pardoned her. If calling the Morrigan as cattle ends up hobbling some of your endeavors, it may be worth looking for opportunities to heal yourself.

THE MORRIGAN AS EEL

The serpentine European eel, now critically endangered, was once plentiful in Irish rivers and a main food source in Ireland, even as far back as 8000 BCE. It's possible that its snake-like appearance gave it a vicious reputation. Although snakes are not found in Ireland, either now or in the Celtic era, snake lore may have come from the main continent. This is not the only serpentine creature found in Morrigan myth, recalling that the son of the Morrigan was said to have snake-shaped creatures in his heart. This may indicate that the Irish Celts believed all serpent creatures were wicked. If so, the Morrigan's shifting into an eel highlights a dangerous part of her nature. Due to its living in the rivers, which were considered liminal, the eel may have been an otherworldly creature, with potential to be more evil than helpful. Then again, the Morrigan's transformation into an eel may have been logical. If Cú Chulainn's battle took place at a river ford, eels would naturally be present.

The Morrigan as eel is a treacherous force, but not necessarily an evil one. Because she shifted into an eel to threaten Cú Chulainn when he positioned himself as her adversary, the eel might symbolize competition or protection—perhaps “tripping up” a threat. As an eel, she doesn't directly injure Cú Chulainn, but

restricts his power. There is also vulnerability with the eel Morrigan. The eel is a small creature, easily trampled or caught. Cú Chulainn breaks the Morrigan's ribs while she is in the shape of an eel. The eel may also be a symbol of the Morrigan's limitations.

Working with the Morrigan as Eel

Just as the Morrigan as an eel tripped up Cú Chulainn, we can summon the eel Morrigan energy to thwart a threat. Eel energy can be utilized when we have been insulted or injured, as a way of reshaping the pain that we received. Perhaps an acquaintance is slandering us out of jealousy. The Morrigan as eel may be able to shift the shape of the situation so that we are no longer the target and the perpetrator's jealousy is revealed for what it is. Alternatively, eel energy may be used to navigate an unfamiliar space, or to help preserve personal boundaries.

Eel energy is a tricky, unpredictable side of an already tricky, unpredictable goddess. It's best to embrace the Morrigan as eel with not only an open mind and flexible attitude, but a good sense of humor as well!

THE MORRIGAN AS HORSE

The Morrigan does not shift into a horse, but given that the gray horse named for Macha appears in several myths as an ally to Cú Chulainn, the horse is worth mentioning as one of the sisters' guises. Ireland was once called "land of swift horses"; horses were revered, racing was a serious pastime, and horsemeat was consumed by royalty at special feasts.⁴ The horse was a symbol of the land and sovereignty over it. Horses were necessary for transportation and revered for their courage, speed, and sexual vigor. The land itself was sometimes envisioned in the form of a mare.

Horses, like many of the Morrigan's animal forms, had otherworldly counterparts. In *Táin Bó Regamna*, the red color of the Morrigan's horse marks it as a death herald. Given that she was returning to the faery mound in the story, the horse may have been of the fae itself. Generally speaking, red animals in Celtic myth are considered otherworldly. The bloodred tears of the Gray of Macha may also hint at an otherworldly connection. So far as the

Morrigan is concerned, the horse may symbolize traveling between the worlds of mortal and of spirit.

There is angst and anguish with this guise of the Morrigan. It is also a symbol of leadership and nobility. It may be the most supportive shape of the Morrigan, one that holds prophetic ability but will stand by the devotee through the trials to come. It may also symbolize travel to the other world.

Working with the Morrigan as Horse

The Gray of Macha had knowledge of the disaster to come, wanted to tell Cú Chulainn the truth, and tried to communicate that truth. Although Cú Chulainn didn't listen, the horse stayed with him even as he was dying. The Morrigan in horse form may bring us difficult truths. This is also the side of the Morrigan we might call if we are going through a tough time and need to feel less alone. If our lives are heading in a direction that is not best for us, this side of the Morrigan may blow up things, just as she wrecked Cú Chulainn's chariot. Recognizing warnings for what they are, not always as challenges to overcome, is its own lesson. The Morrigan as horse may show us how to recognize the difference.

THE MORRIGAN AS WOLF

Wolves existed in Ireland from about 34,000 BCE until their extinction on the island in the late 1700s. They were a threat to Celtic communities, but also a resource. Their pelts could be used as rugs and may have been used as clothing as well. In certain cases, wolves may even have been kept as pets (crows may have been, too).⁵ The wolf straddled the liminal place between the wild and the domesticated.

In Celtic mythology, the wolf image was typically employed as a metaphor for warlike behavior, particularly to describe the fighting styles of Irish warrior groups.⁶ In the *Táin*, the Morrigan as wolf attacks Cú Chulainn in the ford, but not with teeth or claws. She chases cattle into the space where he fights, which overwhelms him. The cattle, a symbol of the tame and regal, are pushed to stampede by the wild wolf in the liminal place of the river ford.

The wolf may be a symbol of the wild breaking the boundaries of the ordered. In wolf form, the Morrigan is swift and ferocious. In

some interpretations of the myth, the Morrigan's wolf appears reddish-gray, bringing another otherworldly aspect to the mortal world. In this, the wolf represents the forces within us that can never be tamed.

Working with the Morrigan as Wolf

The Morrigan's wolf carries energies of both need and revenge. Uniting with Cú Chulainn would have been useful for the Morrigan, but when she could not unite with him, she set out to defeat him. Just as the Celtic warriors were said to be “mad as dogs” in the frenzy of battle, the energy of Morrigan's wolf is one of fury. We might call upon the Morrigan as wolf when we need internal power. Perhaps we are burning with rage. Anger is not an innately negative thing; but without direction, it may consume us. Through her fury, the Morrigan as wolf drove an entire herd of cattle to swarm Cú Chulainn. When we channel the wolf, we channel our own fury to fuel manifestation or change. As the wolf summoned the larger herd animal, we might call upon the wolf when we need a strength even greater than one we can summon alone. However, we must take care to ensure we are seeing clearly. As Cú Chulainn broke the eye of the Morrigan while in wolf form, we must make sure that we are not blinded by our own fury and rage, and are still able to see the truth of our situations.

SOVEREIGN SHAPE-SHIFTING MACHA FROM THE METRICAL DINDENCHAS

Shape-shifters often dispense judgment over whether a ruler is just. In some Celtic myths, a king will approach a “wretched hag” by a well who demands a kiss before he can drink of the well's waters. If the king complies (in some stories, he has intercourse with the hag), the hag shifts into a beautiful maiden who declares him a righteous king. These myths may speak of initiation rites required of the era's kings, but they also represent the trials of leadership. As one hag said to the legendary King Niall, “There are many things about ruling that you will find as repulsive as you found me . . . but as you then came to love me, you will come to love ruling, too.”

Shape-shifting feminine characters often represent the land goddess's influence over whether a mortal king will thrive or

perish. In the next myth, however, Macha is the shape-shifter. Her shifting deems judgment over the sovereignty of not one but several would-be kings, and ultimately seals her own sovereign initiation.

Three kings shared rulership of Ireland, under the agreement that each of them should reign seven years in turn. After three revolutions of each man in the seven years' sovereignty, the first king, Aodh Ruadh, died. He left only one child, Macha Mong Ruadh: red-haired Macha. She demanded her father's turn to rule, but the other two kings, Ciombaoth and Diothorba, refused, claiming they would not grant power to a woman. They went to battle and Macha won. She ruled for seven years. In that time, Diothorba was killed, leaving five sons. The sons demanded their turn at rule, but Macha refused to relinquish sovereignty for she had won it through battle and not agreement. They went to battle, and Macha won again, collecting a host of slaughtered heads, taken from Diothorba's sons' army. She then banished them to the wilderness of Connacht and took Ciombaoth as her husband.

When her union with Ciombaoth was secure, Macha changed her shape to that of a leprous woman, having rubbed herself with the dough of rye and coloring herself red. She found Diothorba's sons in Connacht, cooking a wild hog. They invited her to share their meal and then one man said, "Although she is a hag, her eyes are beautiful. We will each take her to bed tonight." The man took Macha with him into the woods, where by her own strength she tied him up and left him behind, returning to the fire.

"Your man was ashamed to come back to you after sleeping with a leprous woman," she said to the other men.

"No need for shame," they said, "for we will all do the same tonight." Each man took her to the woods in turn, and each she tied up in turn. In the end, she tied all of them together and dragged them back to Ulster, where her people urged her to execute them for what they tried to do to her.

"No," she declared. "For I will not be an unjust ruler. Instead, they will build a rath around me where I stand and it shall be the chief city of Ulster forever." She took the

brooch from her neck and marked the place where they should build. This place is known as Emain Macha.⁷

Macha was not formally in line for the throne. Through luck and fighting, she becomes queen, but her position is vulnerable because of her gender identity. By finding a loophole in the kings' agreement, she retains power for a time. To keep it permanently, she shifts from being the most powerful, and possibly most desired, woman in the country to an outcast. The men's lack of concern about contracting her disease may reveal they believe themselves to be "better than" the disguised woman. Through this shift, Macha uses her enemies' own arrogance against them.

Why didn't Macha simply execute her enemies? Why go through the trouble of shifting her shape? Why put herself at risk for assault? Was this all a plan to gain more support from her people? When Macha brought her attackers forward for judgment, her people's outrage strengthened her claim to the throne. Perhaps she embodied a role similar to the hag at the well, testing the kings' righteousness and revealing their greedy and abusive natures. Perhaps Macha was simply tired of fighting, and shape-shifting was a quick end to the battle. Maybe she simply needed builders for her fort and delighted at the thought of using her adversaries.

Whatever the case may be, Macha's shape-shifting highlights a just nature within the Morrigan sisters. Her people would have executed the men, but Macha chose to embrace justice rather than yield to the crowd's desire. Instead of answering for injury with additional injury, Macha shifts the response to one of restitution, ensuring that what was broken was fixed through service.

This was the second myth detailing how the great rath of Emain Macha was built. The first came through the pain of Macha (the myth in which she dies after racing the horses) and the second through her triumph. Both, in their own ways, come through Macha shifting her shape. We may understand, therefore, that the shape-shifter can invoke justice.

The Morrigan's shape-shifting may be an expression of her connection with the whole living universe of creatures: birds, animals, and humans.⁸ It also highlights her role as a fertility goddess, a concept we will explore later in the book.⁹ While the shape-shifter Morrigan may antagonize other characters, this

ability to change form is one of the most helpful aspects of the sisters. Invoking the shape-shifting Morrigan may invite difficult moments (as it did for me), but lifting weights is difficult too. Yet just as lifting weights strengthens our bodies, the shape-shifting Morrigan strengthens our souls.

MEETING THE SHAPE-SHIFTER MORRIGAN

The shape-shifter Morrigan won't embody only the animal forms discussed here. Her shape-shifter self flits in and out of our lives, rarely in a predictive pattern. Yet those who have worked with the Morrigan for a long time mention that she appears exactly when she is needed, in the exact form that will help most. There will be times when the presence of the Morrigan feels as fervent as the wolf. Other times, she may be more of a persistent, background presence, like a cawing bird on a power line. Perhaps the Morrigan will appear as a group of kindly young people, happily directing you to the bus stop when you're lost. One friend of mine says that when they feel an "insatiable attraction" to a woman who isn't their "typical type," they know the Morrigan is trying to get their attention. For many, the Morrigan's presence can fade away for long periods of time, only to resurface in a new form later on. *Be open to me*, says the shape-shifter Morrigan, *for I will come however you need . . . or however I please.*

Working with the shape-shifting sisters is not only about how they appear to us. Nor is it only meant to shape how we appear to others. The shape-shifter energy also offers the opportunity for us to change our perspective. This can be the most difficult part, and in many cases we must first embrace the shift before it can do its good work on us.

Most of all, just as the Morrigan's potential to shape-shift is infinite, so is our own potential when we are open to this aspect of the goddess. It is confusing. It is sometimes frightening. Experiences via the shape-shifter may leave us with more mysteries than answers. But the shape-shifter Morrigan is the great mover, helping us grow, evolve, learn, survive, and thrive in whatever circumstances we wander through.

RITUAL AND PRAYER: WORKING WITH THE

SHAPE-SHIFTER MORRIGAN

The following ritual and prayer are meant to summon the shape-shifter Morrigan to assist in making a change. It's also fine to use if you would simply like to know the shape-shifter Morrigan better. This ritual offers the opportunity to discover what form the shape-shifting Morrigan would like to reveal to you, of either herself or yourself.

You will need:

- A mirror
- Two candles (battery-operated candles are fine if you cannot have flame in your magickal working space)

Bring the materials to your sacred space, but set up your area slightly differently. Turn your altar to face a different wall, or find a slightly different part of the park to work in. You may also want to try doing the working at a new time of day. If you usually do your spiritual or magickal work in the morning, try doing it in the evening or vice versa. Even a slight shift in your practice will enhance this spell. Some natural darkness is preferred—dawn or dusk is ideal—but be safe, and be mindful of your surroundings in parks or other public secluded spaces.

Before beginning the spell, focus on your intention. What in your life do you want to shift? Perhaps it's to be more self-assured, kinder, or more attractive to new friends or lovers. Maybe it's a shift away from guilt, or a shift toward being better with money. Maybe you simply want a change in your life but don't know what it ought to look like. If it's this last one, be sure to set your intention as wanting a positive change.

Set the mirror between the two lit candles and focus on your reflection in the mirror, softening your eyes so that your reflection blurs a bit. Say the following prayer aloud:

Queens of Ravens, Queens of Kine,
She-wolves, eels, and crones divine,
I take Your hands and cross the rift,
Mold me, shape me, help me shift.

Close your eyes, and repeat the last line until it becomes one big blur in your head: *Mold me, shape me, help me shift*. You may already be seeing forms of animals, young women, or crones in your mind.

When the final line has grown blurry in your mind, open your eyes slightly. To the best of your abilities, keep them unfocused as you look at the mirror. If this is difficult, try fluttering your eyes. You may begin to see a shape of an animal or a woman in the glass.

If you think you see an image, shut your eyes tightly and say aloud, “I embrace the shift.”

Extinguish the candles when you have completed the working. Make notes of any visions you had.

If you did not receive a vision, you didn't do anything wrong. Many people, myself included, don't receive many visions in rituals. For me, rituals and meditations are like vitamins. If I do them regularly, I notice I feel different. But just as I don't feel anything within minutes of taking a vitamin, I rarely notice the effects of my magickal workings until later. You may receive your visions in dreams or in synchronicity. Or you may not receive any visions at all; but you will find your life will begin to shift anyway.

Make notes of unusual things that happen in the days that follow: new people appearing in your life, old friends resurfacing, long-kept secrets revealing themselves . . . they're all part of the shift. Keep track of them, along with thoughts and feelings, to best notice the shifts as they begin to happen.

The Shape-Shifter and Us

When you invoke the shape-shifter aspect of her, there's this divine madness. It can make you crazy. By working with her, you are working backward, through madness, to get to the mysteries. But that's what also gives her that beauty. She was a beautiful, super sexual energy at a time in my life when I was coming into my own queerness. She was not very warlike—more like a

mother. There have been other points when she's presented herself as a man, kind of like a drag queen in a way. Other times, she's shown up as an old hag who lives at the end of the road and doesn't see anyone. I'm in a huge transition between high school and adulthood, and it's that wisdom I'm invoking.

—Nathan King

A Vision of the Morrigan

She's like a really tough auntie, you know? When you're in trouble, she'll advise you, but you need to figure these things out yourself. People will say, "Oh, she's a cruel goddess!" I don't think so. My father died when I was four years of age. My mother, in the 1950s, had five young children to raise. So life in one respect was difficult, but it was adventurous. But she was a good woman, but if you didn't do what you were told she had a wooden spoon and she'd give you a whack. So the Morrigan is like that. The Morrigan is caring, but if you piss her off . . . She doesn't need devotees. She needs people who respect themselves and she can connect with that respect.

When I was trying to understand, I went into Kesh Kerrigan, where one of the hills is called Slieve Mohr, or "big faery hill." That year, it was an extreme physical struggle to climb it. But I met my spirit guide, a black bear, and there was also a raven. The black bear was a woman. She was manly, butchy. She didn't bullshit you, you know? She minded you without protecting you. Off I went on this journey, and where did we go? Into this cave! There was a bit of light up there and water trickling. The old me shrank. Then the bear was gone and I was like, "Holy shit!" And I was scared! I had a vision of these two women who came dressed in

something like Egyptian dress, but not exactly. I saw them washing me down with the water and this woman came out. I didn't recognize her, but I kind of knew who she was, didn't I? She looked at me, straight into my eyes, and I felt claws go into my heart. She ripped my heart out and held it out. She took everything until all that was left was a skeleton, and even that changed. She came along and put this gold heart within me. She put skin on me and, would you believe it, I ended up as this white raven. The top of the cave opened and I didn't fly, but more wafted up. I went down to the bottom, which was dust, and I could see people walking along. There were fires and mists, and they were all on this journey, carrying their torches. I could see all over this land. Then I came back into the cave, and she was there and she just looked at me. Later I discovered that there were bear bones nearby—because there were once bears in Ireland.

—Uinsean O'Cuill

CHAPTER 7

The Land Goddess, the Fertility Goddess, and the Healer



“The Morrígan Dedication” by Maleaha Davenport

It seemed unfair that I began writing a chapter on fertility goddesses on the same day that I learned our new fertility treatment had failed. Everything I read about land goddesses, and fertility goddesses, was packed with descriptions of “fruitful” versus

“barren,” “abundance” over “scarcity.” Fertility goddesses were described as beacons of hope for a culture such as that of the Celts, but to me they felt distant, uncaring, or even nonexistent. But it was within those feelings that I found comradeship with the ancient Celts. The fertility goddesses were fickle in their world, too, but in a much more dire way. My own arguments with food aside, at least I had a full fridge, a grocery store nearby if we ran out of food, and money to purchase it. A fertility goddess might disappoint me, but she would never kill me. This was not true for the Celts. The productivity of their land was the difference between life and death. A positive relationship with a land and fertility goddess was believed to be an essential part of life.

But a goddess of healing? *Tsk*. Please. The Morrigan was no goddess of healing—not to me, anyway. Hadn't she only healed Cú Chulainn so she could heal herself? Why should I even bother writing the sisters into this book as goddesses of healing? There were many incredible things about the Morrigan, but for my own journey, she'd had me dig up a whole bunch of pain without showing me how to get through it.

My husband and I left for Ireland a few days after learning the results of the fertility treatment. One stop on our trip was Oweynagat, the Cave of the Cats. It would be my fourth time in the cave, but my first time in there alone. The cave is at the end of a lane, a hole in the ground beneath a thorn tree in a nondescript pasture. It had been years since I'd been in the cave, and I got us lost along the unmarked country roads on the way there. We drove slowly while I looked for anything familiar. A raven swooped down in front of our rental car, and we followed it for a bit until I finally saw landmarks I remembered. When we stopped the car, the biggest black cat I'd ever seen stared at us from the road. We'd found the spot. My patient husband sat outside while I prepared to climb in.

I wasn't afraid until I started to descend. In the past, when I'd gone in with groups, the narrow entry and darkness were exciting. But this time I was alone. With the flashlight in my teeth, I crab-walked down, knocking my head on the stone carved with ancient ogham script. I was scared. What would be down there? What if I got hurt? What if my recurring nightmare came true and the cave collapsed around me?

Once I made it through the narrow entryway, the cave sloped down before expanding into a larger area where it was possible to stand. The mud was thick, and although Ireland had suffered a drought that summer, it was still quite wet. My feet sunk and stuck in the mud so deeply that I wondered if I would lose my boots. I nestled in against the back wall of the cave, where it had once indeed collapsed decades before, closing off the back chamber permanently. My old fears returned. My chest felt tight. *This was a mistake. I never should have come.*

No. I had traveled nearly five thousand miles to sit alone in that cave. I couldn't run now. It was cold, damp, and quiet. I closed my eyes when I flicked off the flashlight so I couldn't see the darkness. The silence seemed thicker without the light and the drips from the walls even louder. I heard the panicked buzzing of a fly who had managed to find its way into the cave too. Finally, I opened my eyes to see the dark. It was that cliché kind of blackness, where you can't see your hand before your face and you inadvertently open your eyes wider as if that will help things. There I was, deep in the cave. What was I supposed to do?

I sang.

It wasn't a song I knew. Maybe someone had once taught it to me and I'd forgotten, but it felt new in my heart and ears. I sang louder. I wanted to feel the vibrations of my own voice off the walls of the cave. I sang until I cried.

Then, I cried in silence, the only sounds being the drips from the cave walls and the drips from my face, both *plopping* into the pools below. The cave seemed bigger in the darkness, and I no longer feared that it would collapse. Its cold, solid stone reminded me that it had held up the weight of the earth long before the Celts discovered it. It would hold me, too. And in that space, the Morrigan held and collected my tears in the thick mud beneath my feet. The anger, the sorrow, the losses unrecognized, the fury at things being beyond my control . . . the cave held it all, and the Morrigan did too.

Did you think yourself so powerful that you could shoulder the world? a silent voice said. *You've shifted before. You can shift again.* And that's when I saw the vision of me shifting out from beneath the weight of my pain, like the cold boulder I sat against, to simply sitting beside the sorrows. The Morrigan wasn't fixing my

problems, but she held me in that space—and because I was held, I could shift. Because I could shift, perhaps I could heal.

The Morrigan, particularly as a land goddess, can be as silent as the cold, still earth. The sisters embody the power and presence of the land goddess. We are part of that energy, but that energy does not exist for our bidding. This was my humbling but liberating realization about the Morrigan.

It's an unsuspecting but truthful method of healing. It's not a *curing*. Sometimes the Morrigan might change some of the circumstances, but in many cases we simply have to make it through it, alone. But just as the earth holds us while we walk upon it, the Morrigan holds us on that journey, too.

THE MORRIGAN AS LAND GODDESS

Today, land goddesses are commonly thought of as sensual, benevolent, and loving beings: tame, ever kind, nurturing, consistently forgiving and forever patient, and sometimes voraciously sexual. They exist to love, comfort, and please, wanting nothing more than to wash away our every tear and provide us with blessings described as bountiful, life-giving, restorative, and renewing. But for earlier cultures, the relationship between people and their land goddess was one that modern therapists might encourage their clients to abandon.

The land goddess was one to appease and distract, to court or woo in the hopes that she would provide. Sometimes, she did. But she could be indiscriminately cruel, seemingly extracting demands and tolls on those who had no choice but to rely on her. She would then return to being extremely generous. For the Celts, the land was life, pulsing with potential but also mystery and danger, one in which faeries lurked, one that could sometimes be a formidable enemy. Despite generally being a thriving culture, archaeologists and environmental scientists suggest that at least one great agricultural collapse occurred in Celtic Ireland.¹ It's unknown if this was caused by disease, war, crop failure, or a shift toward a cattle-based economy, but it does hint at the complicated relationship between the Celts and their land—and therefore with their land goddesses too. The silent, omnipresent land goddess decided whether the people would thrive or starve. The task of the

mortal people was to figure out how to be in relationship with such a presence.

The idea of the land being female is ancient to the Celtic world in general and to Ireland in particular. Ireland has never had a “fatherland identity,” in contrast to other cultures (such as Japan or Germany). Ireland's very name derives from Éire, one of a triune of goddesses associated with the island.² The land was a mother, the mother was a goddess, and the goddess took complicated forms. The land itself was a queen—the Great Queen.

The land goddesses could not be virginal. Their reproductive capabilities naturally lent their myths to sexual encounters. In one selection from the *Dindsenchas* (a collection of stories explaining the origins of physical locations in Ireland), the sister of a king enchants the sun so that it is always day, a possible allusion to the summer solstice. The king, by committing incest with her, brings the night again.³

The possibly contradictory nature of the mother-land-sex-healer-nurturer goddess incites more argument among Morrigan followers than any other. I've seen passionate discussions from some who experience a mother's love in their Morrigan devotions, and strong argument from others who feel a goddess of war and faery cannot be counted on for such a relationship. I've read and heard that the Morrigan is both a great healer and never a healer. Some say she is the land we stand on; others say she is only the land in Ireland; and still others say she is not of this world at all and therefore never of the land.

One struggle may be in reconciling modern perceptions of an earth goddess with a goddess of war, as in, how could a warfaring goddess also be one of the earth? Challenges around her sexual nature may reflect our own culture's struggle with feminine sexuality in general, highlighting that modern people may have difficulty imagining a goddess being both sexual and maternal. It may be that modern ideas of land and fertility goddesses are far more limited than those imagined by the Celts. As I promised early in this book, it's my role to only offer perspectives, and I leave it to you, the reader, to draw conclusions. What I can offer is that if there is anything to be learned about the Morrigan, it is to not put her in a box, for as soon as we do, she is bound to break it.

Whether modern depictions paint the Morrigan as a land

goddess or not, it's undeniable that her identity was once, at least in part, tied to the physical land. Several natural places carry the name of the Morrigan, such as Mur na Morrigna (the mound of the Morrigan), the whirlpool of Corryveckan (the Morrigan's cauldron), and Gort na Morrigna (the field of the Morrigan).⁴ The Morrigan is also connected to natural caves such as Oweynagat, and certainly with rivers, as made evident by her tryst and battles at the fords. In other myths, Cú Chulainn mentions a visit to the Garden of the Morrigan, a place supposedly given to her by the Dagda. Dá Chich Anann (the Paps of Anu) in County Kerry are named for Anu, who is sometimes thought to be a Morrigan sister. The two curvaceous hills look like female breasts from afar. This may have inspired the pre-Celts to build cairns on each one, structures which resemble nipples from far away, reinforcing the idea that ancient people viewed the earth as a motherly body. These ancients may have bequeathed this belief to the Celtic Irish.

It's also suggested that the early Irish Morrigan may not have been a war goddess at all, but a multifaceted deity whose very name implied guardianship over a specific region.⁵ It is perhaps through her role as land goddess that she became a goddess of war, fertility, and even the faeries. The Celts, to whom the land was a living female being, also believed the land could wage war on humanity or take sides in wars between tribes and determine who lived and who didn't. The Morrigan is even said to have killed someone in the garden the Dagda gifted her.

The land was the Great Queen. Although Celtic kings married mortal women, the land was considered his true consort. It was believed that a king's marriage to the land would promote its fertility. This king, controlled by strict taboos, would act as a lightning rod against forces of nature such as droughts, storm, famine, disease, and more—things that were often imagined as malevolent creations by otherworldly beings or products of the land goddess herself. As the king was the mate of the regional goddess, it was only she who could confer sovereignty upon him.⁶ In many stories, the land's fruitfulness and prosperity were dependent on whether the ruling king was the rightful one.⁷ Both famines and bountiful harvests were often attributed to the land goddess's approval of the king. Macha, as the mother goddess, was considered a patroness of kingship, and her great horse race has been described as a mystical way to refer to the course of a king's

reign.⁸ It's even been argued that Macha was an alternative name for Mór-Ríoghain, and the warlike imagery of the sisters reflects contests for the land. Could the modern Mór-Ríoghain, the Great Queen, have descended from the ancient view of the land as female, sovereign, and divine?

The Morrigan may be commonly associated with war and battle now, but even through this aspect she has never fully distanced herself from her land goddess associations. In the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, the sisters brought hailstones and fierce showers upon the Fomorians, clear illustrations of the Morrigan's combined functions as a war goddess with power over the land and a protectress of her people.

To the Celts, natural forces were direct manifestations of the gods. In Ireland, weather can change rapidly. A heavy rain may soak one side of a hill while leaving the other side warm and dry. A group of warriors planning to raid the cattle of the neighboring tribe could suddenly come across a hailstorm while trying to attack. Such a circumstance might have been viewed as the land goddess acting as a warrior, protecting a certain group of people. When remembering that the Morrigan sisters never picked up a single weapon but used their command of the elements to thwart or unnerve their enemies, we may be looking directly at one or several ancient land goddesses who fought when the circumstances needed it.

Badb, who delivered warnings about battles and deaths to come, might not seem like a land goddess, until we recall the natural connection between the land and death. Dead things, plant or flesh, decompose on the soil and become fertilizer for new life. A goddess of the land would have an intimate understanding of death. In the natural cycle of things, death goddesses either work closely with land goddesses or embody both in yet another paradox.

Current images of a land goddess may often paint a benevolent and kind picture, but the Morrigan's sometimes fickle and moody qualities may better reflect the earth mother the ancients knew.

THE MORRIGAN AS FERTILITY GODDESS

Fertility goddesses may not be naturally aligned with war and

death in most minds, but it makes perfect sense in my own experience. I live in the Pacific Northwest, one of the most fertile areas of North America. As my father says, "There's nothing that can't grow here . . . except good tomatoes." A major reason for our region's fertility is volcanic ash. The glaciers of the great volcanoes that dot the landscape feed the rivers. Rain clouds formed over the Pacific Ocean struggle to pass their peaks, keeping the valley damp, temperate, and fertile most of the year. Although eruptions are rare, at any time one of the great volcanoes could blow and choke the air with the very ash that will ultimately nourish the soils, but will first wash away communities in hot mud. We are also expecting a serious earthquake sometime in the coming decades, as a major faultline runs beneath the fertile ground. That which nourishes can destroy, and that which destroys can also nourish is a lesson my region lives with every day. Although the Morrigan is not associated with volcanoes or earthquakes, this paradox reveals the violent and fertile nature of the land, as well as the dual violent and benevolent nature of the Morrigan.

Likewise, the roles of the sisters as fertility goddesses weave their way through contemporary Morrigan imagery, but rarely without controversy. These images are often paired with scantily clad, dreamy-faced, "sexy" images of the Morrigan. Some argue that these images are demeaning—shaped for and by heterosexual male desire. Others find such images empowering, citing that in a time when major religions often suppress feminine sexuality, an unapologetically sexual goddess is a helpful antidote.

Equally disputed is the idea of the Morrigan as a mother. Because of the Morrigan's connotations with war and death, it's argued that she could never be a maternal nurturer. Others point out that there are mothers in the military, and parents battling on behalf of their children for medical care, education, and other needs. Still others shrug and say this is just another Morrigan paradox.

But whether the Morrigan is a sex goddess, a mother goddess, or a combination, in one myth the Morrigan does have sex. In another myth, she attempts to seduce. In a different myth, she is a mother. In addition to Méche (the son of the Morrigan with three snake-like shapes in his heart), three sons are listed as belonging to the Morrigan in one myth; in another, these three are said to be the

sons of Danu, while Anu, another maternal goddess associated with the land, was sometimes interchanged with the Morrigan.⁹ Macha gave birth to twins. Nemain is said to be a mother herself. In many cases, the Morrigan's motherhood carries a tragic note. Macha dies while giving birth, and Méche is killed because the serpents in his heart were a direct threat to Ireland. This may reflect the time in which these myths were originally spun, perhaps when infant mortality and dying during childbirth was more commonplace. It may also highlight the sacrifices made by the earth goddess for the work of agriculture, or else explain that the products of the earth could be both helpful and dangerous to humanity.

The old Pagan fertility goddesses were not virgins, nor were they eternally peaceful. They were considered mothers as well as warriors. The Christian faith that would ultimately blanket the Celtic world believed in a male creator god who made the world through intention. The idea of a feminine being birthing the world was cast aside. Writers of subsequent centuries might have blushed and edited out bawdier details of the old myths, trying in vain to fit deities like the Morrigan into divine, celibate feminine roles they better understood. But before this change took place, the Celts knew a mother goddess needed to mate with a male consort to give birth.

*The Union of the Morrigan and the
Dagda in the Cath Tánaiste Maige Tuired
(The Second Battle of Mag Tuired)*

This is the extended text of the encounter between the Dagda and the Morrigan, just before she went off to kill his enemies.¹⁰

The Dagda lived in Glenn Etin in the north, and met with a woman annually at Samhain. On the Samhain just prior to the battle of Glenn Etin, the woman straddled the river, with one foot on either shore, washing her genitals. Her hair was in nine loosened tresses upon her head. The Dagda approached and spoke to her, and they united. From that day forward, the place where they met was called, "The Place of the Married Couple." This woman was the Morrigan.

After their union, the Morrigan instructed the Dagda on how to defend his land against the Fomorians, while she herself would go and injure the king of the Fomorians, taking

the blood of his heart and kidneys of his battle ardor. She would then give to the enemy warriors two handfuls of blood, striking, groaning, warlike by the Ford of Unsen. This ford was forever after called the Ford of Utter Destruction because of the magical injury done to the king.

This myth is perhaps one of the most dissected and widely interpreted in the Morrigan canon. The Dagda makes his annual pilgrimage south to meet with a woman who is insinuated as being his wife, and this woman is the Morrigan. The exact meaning of the nine loosened tresses is unknown. Three was a powerful number for the Celts, and so the number nine, thrice three, may have denoted something particularly powerful. In many cultures a woman will hide her hair from everyone but her husband. While we don't know if that was true for the Celts, the Morrigan certainly seems comfortable with the Dagda in a unique way. The loosened tresses might be a sign of intimacy. She is not startled or surprised by his approach. She likely knew he was coming and was preparing herself. It may also symbolize taking a break from her work, letting her hair down like it's the end of her work shift. After a presumably passionate evening with the Dagda, she gives him battlefield advice and goes to destroy the Fomorian king herself.

This story is unique among many myths, because not only does the goddess engage in sex, she does so consensually. In plenty of other myths, the female is pursued and “ravaged,” creating the impression that the encounter was an assault. Is this a moment of unity? Does the Dagda earn the trust of the Morrigan, and therefore her battle prowess too? Does straddling a river represent the relationship between the regional land goddess and a tribal protector god? The combination of a war and sexual function is common to many regional land goddesses, both protecting and promoting the abundance of food and temperate weather.¹¹ Perhaps this speaks to some kind of long-lost ritual, maybe that of a king praying in wild spaces prior to war or winter, asking the spirits how to best care for his community. Or perhaps the Dagda, the god of plenty, represents the bountiful part of the year, while the Morrigan, the goddess familiar with death and destruction, stands for the winter? Given that Samhain is the beginning of Celtic winter and this meeting was an annual one, the union of the Dagda and the Morrigan might represent the changing of the

seasons.

A ford is a naturally shallow part of a river, an easy point of crossing and a crucial part of navigating the land. Land goddesses appear within Irish mythology as spirits of natural places and divinities of natural forces of motherhood, fertility, growth, and destruction. Male divinities were warriors, craftsmen, magicians, seers, and nurturers, with an emphasis on food and other pleasures of the flesh.¹² The Morrigan appearing at a ford may symbolize her role as a guardian or represent both the dangers and promises offered by crossing the ford for the warrior Dagda. In this myth, the Morrigan as land goddess may be expressed through her use of the water and utilization of its potential. If so, she would not be the only one.

Another Celtic origin myth includes that of Cessair, granddaughter of the biblical Noah, who came to Ireland on her own ark. Although the story has a biblical association, it may be associated with an even older story in which a woman was brought across the sea, inducing a flood.¹³ This may be a truly ancient tale, possibly inspired by the end of the last ice age when retreating glaciers caused widespread flooding, preserved in oral tradition until it merged with Christian myths. The water nurtures the land, and the goddess who appears at it may be the embodiment of the living earth itself and the powers that care for it. This myth of the Morrigan and the Dagda may evoke an ancient tradition of the warrior seeking insight from the land goddess before going off to fight.

This tryst may also speak to another belief of the Celtic era. The king may be merely man, but the regional land goddess is immortal. She would take a succession of mortal king husbands, marrying the next after the former passed away. Queen Medb of Connacht (from the *Táin*) is sometimes thought to be a regional goddess herself. In some myths, Medb mates with nine successive Irish kings, which may further explain her request that her husband not be jealous of her taking other lovers.¹⁴ Influenced by the belief that the land was the consort to the king, a Celtic king's coronation was profoundly sexual, the king demonstrating sovereignty by publicly having intercourse with a mare or a cow. The animal represented the land, and perhaps the land goddess, in physical form. The animal would then be butchered and boiled and

the king would bathe in the broth before it would be served to the gathered tribe.¹⁵ The sexual act created a pact. Through this coronation rite, in which he married the land goddess, the king was expected to guard and defend the land. In return, the land would be bountiful. The Morrigan's union with the Dagda may have symbolized his assuming leadership and reflected her, as land goddess, accepting him as a sovereign and in turn protecting his people and endeavors.

On a more warfaring goddess note, this myth may also highlight the Morrigan's powers of espionage. She is said to be the Dagda's wife in this myth, but the Fomorian Neit is said to have married several of the Morrigan sisters. If the land goddess is a great queen, she could certainly be married to more than one king. She might even have married several kings at once, and chosen who was most righteous by sparing him from rain, hail, and lightning during his cattle raid. The Morrigan's tryst with the Dagda might have been more than simply an annual date. She may have been acting as a spy, giving her preferred king information on what the Fomorians would plan to do.¹⁶ If we imagine the Fomorians as natural phenomena, it makes sense that a land goddess would also be married to forces of rain, hail, or drought and would be an excellent source of information for avoiding these effects.

A land and fertility goddess does not exist outside or above the earth. She is part of every tiny molecule of human existence—the beautiful and the dirty, the growing and the decaying, the comforting and the painful, all the aspects of living. Just as sex is part of life, sex is part of the reality of the land and fertility goddess. Yet, sex is not the only part. The Morrigan shouldn't be cloistered off as a sexless deity. To do so would risk repeating the mistakes of the Christian monks who painted out deities' sexuality to better fit their comfort. But the sisters ought not to be overly sexualized, either, as doing so overshadows other important aspects of them, repeating the modern mistakes of trivializing feminine persons to only their bodies. Our current culture's struggle to accept a goddess's sexuality reflects its same struggle to accept feminine sexuality in general. Understanding the Morrigan as a sexual being without the Morrigan being *only* a sexual being likely won't be resolved until we can resolve that same question among ourselves.

However this myth is interpreted, the meeting is certainly, but not only, lustful. There is an exchange of power, promises made, plans executed. A better descriptor for their union might not be simply sex, but consummation. Just as the king would consummate with a land proxy to seal his pact to defend his land and people, the Morrigan's union with the Dagda may represent something similar. If the Morrigan is a land and fertility goddess, she demands loyalty from those who wish to know her. A message in this may be that in treating the earth with respect and making it the first priority, it too will reward in kind.

THE MORRIGAN AS HEALER

In this story from the *Táin*, the Morrigan's curse upon Cú Chulainn is fulfilled, as is Cú Chulainn's counter-curse. After sustaining injuries from each other, in the end they ultimately heal one another.

After Cú Chulainn refused the Morrigan and she cursed him, he was set up to fight the warrior Lóch mac Mofemis. The two men met at the ford of the river and began to fight. As they exchanged blows, an eel wrapped itself around Cú Chulainn's feet three times and he fell back in the ford. Lóch attacked him with a sword until the water ran red with Cú Chulainn's blood. His enemies taunted him until Cú Chulainn rose up, striking the eel and breaking its ribs. He fought Lóch even harder than before when cattle stampeded through the army, carrying off the warriors' tents on their horns. It was then that a she-wolf drove the cattle back upon Cú Chulainn. With his sling, he hurled a stone at the wolf, crushing a single eye. The wolf shifted to a hornless red heifer and led the cattle on a stampede through the ford and river. Cú Chulainn cried out, "I cannot tell the ford from the deep of the river!" He slung a stone at the heifer, breaking her legs beneath her. It was then that the Morrigan's promise had come to pass, as well as his own promise to her.

Wearied and growing wearier, Cú Chulainn summoned one last chant to raise his spirits, fighting and killing Lóch and cutting off his head. Great fatigue came over Cú Chulainn. It was then that the Morrigan appeared as an old woman with

a shriveled eye and a misshapen head, walking on wobbly legs as though from a long-ago injury. She milked a cow with three teats. In need of strength, Cú Chulainn asked for a drink. The Morrigan gave him milk from the first teat.

“Good health to you!” Cú Chulainn said. “The blessing of God and man be upon you for your gift of milk.”

The Morrigan's head was healed. She gave him milk from the second teat, and her shriveled eye was restored, too. When she gave him milk from the third, her legs were made strong and whole again. It was then that Cú Chulainn recognized her.

“You said you would never heal me, but here you have!” the Morrigan said.

“Had I known it was you, I would not have done it,” said Cú Chulainn.

This section of the *Táin* occurs immediately after Cú Chulainn refuses the Morrigan's offer to unite with and assist him. He has been defending his province of Ireland single-handedly and is largely unstoppable, but the warrior Lóch is seasoned and formidable. Cú Chulainn is barely out of adolescence when he fights and Lóch is dressed in raiment of horn skin, making him even more resistant to Cú Chulainn's blows. Things are already largely out of Cú Chulainn's favor when the Morrigan sets upon him in her shapes of eel, wolf, and heifer. When the cattle ultimately swarm him in the river, Cú Chulainn is in more trouble, as he can no longer see where the river is shallow enough to stand in.

Yet he somehow prevails, but not without being completely exhausted. The Morrigan approaches him in human form, revealing the injuries she sustained in the river. Perhaps because he is exhausted, or perhaps because he doesn't recognize her in the form of an old woman, Cú Chulainn asks for milk from her three-teated cow (the triplicate image being a sign of the Morrigan but also a general sign of the divine), and when he receives it he is so thankful that he offers her a blessing, which heals her. She essentially mocks him for healing her, and he replies with the Cú Chulainn–Morrigan catchphrase, “If I had known it was you . . .”

We learn through this myth that the Morrigan has the power to

heal. We don't know whether she is interested in healing Cú Chulainn only because she herself is injured and wants his pardon or if she would have done it anyway. As we've learned, milk and dairy products were a crucial part of the Celtic food source. The healing may be symbolic of basic nourishment. A warrior who had spent days or weeks fighting would likely be grateful for fresh milk. It may be a symbol of the natural earth's providence. Then again, milk was also seen as otherworldly. The Morrigan's cow was likely of the faery world and thus its milk had magickal powers. This may also represent the wonder of the land goddess, the goddess's cow representing her ability to provide and restore.

Healing and nourishment are synonymous, particularly in a period of human history when food sources could not be taken for granted. The Morrigan is also known for her magickal fire spit, one that could hold three kinds of food—raw meat, cooked meat, and butter. The raw meat cooked perfectly, the cooked meat remained unburned, and the butter never melted away.¹⁷ While we don't know what these three items specifically symbolized to the Celtic Irish, the general theme is abundance. Fulacht na Mór Ríoghna, the “cooking pit of the Morrigan,” is a title for some ancient cooking sites, which may have been named for the Morrigan, meaning she may have a legacy as being a goddess of providence.¹⁸ The Morrigan is rarely seen with tools, but this one specific tool enables her to continually provide for those in need.

The land could be harsh. The Morrigan could be harsh. Yet both could offer nourishment, and therefore healing.

LAND GODDESSES, KEEPERS OF DEATH

Given that death is part of the natural cycle, a land goddess cannot avoid a relationship with death. Macha, in dying in several myths only to be reborn in others, may represent regeneration. Anyone who has ever tended a garden knows the importance of compost, death and decay being great fertile gifts. Death may have been an accepted part of life, but it was nonetheless terrifying. If a land goddess could bring forth life through her fertile powers, that goddess could also bring death.

The Morrigan can appear as a crone, a symbol that may be associated with a death goddess. As a land goddess, Badb would

have surely had foreknowledge of death to come, giving her the ability to herald doom. As the religion changed, so did the understanding of the Morrigan's prophecies; but instead of a natural part of a land goddess's job, she became a symbol of fright. The “scary side” of the land goddess's power had an enduring impact, and even into Christianized mythology mythic omens of doom continued to contain a feminine form.¹⁹ The things about the Morrigan that frighten us now may be an echo of what terrified the ancients about a world they did not fully understand—and also represent what we ourselves fear or do not understand.

RITUAL AND PRAYER: WORKING WITH THE LAND GODDESS AND HEALER MORRIGAN

To begin, ask the earth how you may help heal it before asking for the healing, yourself. Even if you aren't in need of healing, this is a good practice to become better in touch with the Morrigan as land goddess.

Find a way to sit in a natural environment: your yard, a park, or even near a potted plant if you're unable to be outside. We spend so much time taking from the earth; this ritual is designed to give something back.

Allow the thoughts to drift from your mind. If they come up, simply let them pass.

Recite the following words:

Anu, Danu, Morrighu, Badb,
Macha and others, in wells and hillside,
I come to help, I come to heal,
I await your word from where I kneel . . .

Repeat the words until you feel the air vibrate with your prayer.

Sit in silence for a few minutes, observing the environment around you. You may see insects swarming around a particular tree, only to notice it is being choked with ivy that could use removing. You might notice an animal in need of water. It's not a good practice to feed wild animals, but leaving out a water source if your area has been dry might be helpful.

If you don't notice anything right away, be particularly attuned or attentive over the next three days. You might hear about a park cleanup or a petition to protect a wild area in need of signatures.

When your work is complete, ask the Morrigan for the healing you need. Be open to how it manifests. A condition you struggle with may heal itself, but as is more common, you may be led by intuition or coincidence to new methods of treating the ailment. The gods are often big proponents of our modern medicine, and if that's what will heal us, they will remove obstacles so that we can obtain it.

This work may lead to an increased connection with the area of earth you helped heal. It might require effort in the end, but the Morrigan always pays in kind. You may find your garden is more bountiful the next year, or your roof is spared in a bad storm. You might get a hint that rain is coming when it's not in the forecast and you find yourself the fortunate one with an umbrella at a wet bus stop!

If Your Need for Healing Is Urgent

Let me be clear—if the issue is an emergency, seek professional medical help immediately. If your issue isn't an emergency, but you don't have the time or physical strength to do the earth-healing work, it's fine to go ahead and directly ask for the Morrigan's healing first. Later, when you're well, you can complete the earth-healing work.

She Will Test You

I very much respect the Morrigan, but I don't know that I would use the word “love” between us. I'm more in awe of Her. She commands respect. With the Morrigan, sometimes you'll get this feeling of pure love. Other times, the feeling is quite harsh, like, “Why are you bothering me with this stuff? Come and talk to me when there's something important going on.” She pushes me to do things. I never saw myself doing a master's in

archeology, but here I am in the third semester. We've not had as much of a relationship since I've been back in college, but when I'm really upset about something I'll call Her in. I'll feel raven claws in my shoulder or I'll see a lot of crows. They'll circle the car; they'll follow me. She doesn't require me to pray or light candles to her every day, but if I need Her, She's there.

One Samhain, after numerous occasions where She had made herself known to me, I traveled to Oweynagat with an audio recorder. There in the cave, in the dark, I offered myself to Her as a priestess. I felt Her accept it on condition—I had to be celibate for one year. She wasn't just accepting me. I had to give her something. She also wanted me to record a Samhain meditation that journeyed into the cave. I recorded my dedication, and when I played the recording later I could hear Her speaking to me. But when I played it for someone else, they couldn't hear Her.

It's an honor to be accepted as a priestess, but I don't know that it does you any favors. Most women I know who work with the Morrigan are divorced or single or have had a lot of trouble finding a partner. I don't know if that's because the Morrigan picks strong women or because she picks women who have been through a lot of emotional and physical troubles. She chooses people who don't necessarily believe in themselves, but who have a great deal of inner strength. She will push you to bring out the best in yourself. She will definitely test you. She picks people She knows won't crack.

—Teresa Kerrigan

CHAPTER 8

Magick with the Morrigan: Spells, Rituals, and Meditations



“Morrigan” by Craig Yeung

We've explored the myths, hopefully finding a few pieces for you to use in your personal spiritual journey. Now, we come to the magick, and the Morrigan has plenty of it. Magick (spelled with a “k” to separate the spiritual practice from the pulling-a-coin-out-of-your-ear kind of magic) is the practice of using forces inside and outside of yourself to make changes in your life. The act of using magick, perhaps most commonly known as casting spells, is aided by spiritual forces. (Some traditions would credit ancestors, aliens, or deities with why magick works.)

Personal transformation is one of the greatest offerings of magick, but it's not the only magick we can make in this world. We

live in a time of incredible potential yet extreme inequality. It is understandable to want to change circumstances that are otherwise out of our control. This is, and has always been, the pull toward casting magick spells, speaking incantations, and sometimes even approaching the gods themselves.

Whether to consult the sisters for magick or not is a personal choice. Some feel strongly that the Morrigan should never be approached for help in casting spells. Others feel that the Morrigan should be approached only for specific things, such as magickal spells for justice-related causes, but never for anything of a personal nature. Still others take no issue with engaging the Morrigan for any sort of spiritual work. Again, I find myself in the middle. I believe the Morrigan can be approached with any request, but the work will be done on the Morrigan's terms and timeline. If you summon the Morrigan for magickal work, summon your own patience and banish narrow expectations at the same time. You'll need the former and the latter won't help at all.

No one has to do magick, even if they are in relationship with a goddess of magick like the Morrigan. If casting spells is not part of your spiritual practice, it's not imperative to start now. But even those uninterested in casting spells may find the following sections helpful in better knowing the Morrigan.

MAGICK SPELLS: WHAT THEY ARE AND HOW THEY WORK

Most people have seen the familiar media image of a spooky woman chanting over something smoky and mysterious. Like the Morrigan herself, spell-casting is both alluring and scary to those who are unfamiliar with it. In reality, spell-casting is akin to a concentrated form of prayer. Both spells and prayers are the act of asking a higher power to bless, protect, banish, or intervene in a situation. Spells are different in that they also involve a physical act such as lighting candles, making a bath, or collecting herbs in a jar. All results will vary, but spells usually work faster and with more tangible results than prayer alone. Spells usually require a pact between the caster and a higher power.

Spells usually include some or all of the following:

- Invocation to the higher power, perhaps a chant or song.
- Statement of intent (e.g., “to increase my personal wealth” or “to keep my children safe”).
- A ritualistic action, such as lighting a candle or performing a ritual bath.
- Raising of energy through song, chant, or movement.
- Making a pact with the higher power. Some might make a libation in the higher power's honor, such as a cup of tea or a glass of wine. Other offerings might be service oriented: “I will collect garbage in the park for three consecutive days, dedicating my work to You.”
- Giving thanks to the higher power and concluding the rite with an affirmation, such as, “May it be so,” “Ashe,” or “So mote it be.”

The order of these actions can vary, but I do not know of effective spells that do not involve at least of a few these components. Some spells are quite complicated and will require multiple rituals or tending over a long period of time—even years! However, most spells are quite simple. The spells in this chapter are of the simpler variety, and all are connected to the Morrigan.

SPELLS WITH THE MORRIGAN

There is one more specific difference between prayer and spellcraft. Prayer usually asks a favor from the higher power, whereas spellwork requires entering a relationship with one. Like human relationships, a relationship with a divine being takes time to build. Deities are not baristas: their role is not to give us exactly what we want, when we want it, in the exact manner that we want it. Engaging deity in spellwork is more like hiring an expert for a project. Because the expert has more experience with the work, we trust them to use their own methods or even edit the original plan. We then need to step back and let the expert do their work. Like the expert, the deity connects with a spell because the work interests them and/or they see something to gain from it. Ultimately, we gain something, too.

Deity gains strength through devotion. Engaging deity in spellwork is a type of devotion, itself. Devotional prayers, songs, and offerings are all common ways to “pay” the deity for their

engagement on your spell. However, I have found that offering service, such as collecting trash in the park, can be a more effective offering than a song or a cup of tea. (Then again, maybe the gods would rather watch me run around than hear me sing.) Deity loves a pact. When we offer something for the gods, they are more likely to give us the life improvements we desire.

One note of caution when offering a pact to any deity: Keep it. In my first book, *Brigid*, I mentioned offering to write a book for Brigid in exchange for help with a college assignment. Brigid kept her end of the bargain and I excelled. I started to write that book but soon abandoned it, foolishly thinking my “good intention” was enough. It wasn't. My writing career and personal life hit terrible skids until I completed that book for Brigid, the one titled to and about her. While I didn't make that same promise to the Morrigan, I did offer to write this book in exchange for some personal graces. It was going well until yesterday, when I spent more time on social media than writing and as a result missed a personal deadline for this book. Perhaps not surprisingly, my phone died this morning while I was scrolling. I'm now writing this from a WiFi-less pub while I wait for it to be repaired. Lesson learned. Again.

My Pagan journey has almost solely involved devotion to Celtic deities, so I cannot speak to whether they are tougher about pacts than other pantheons. But given that the Celtic myths are packed with stories of individuals breaking personal taboos and suffering for it, if my own tales do not convince you of the seriousness with which to take your pacts with the Celtic gods, may the myths speak for themselves.

At the same time, this is not meant to scare anyone off from making such pacts. The Celtic gods are generous and helpful. They only ask that we honor our end of our bargain, which is certainly a fair exchange.

PREPARING YOURSELF FOR SPELLWORK

Just as you'd want to tidy up before inviting an important person into your home, you will want to figuratively clean house before inviting deity in. Discussions about spellcraft frequently quote something called the “Law of Three,” which essentially means that whatever you put out in the world will come back to you three

times. For example, if you bless someone, you'll be thrice blessed. If you curse someone, you'll be thrice cursed. The reality of spell magick is not that simple. Magick is more like working with fire. Fire is lovely. It makes for romantic candlelit dinners. Fire warms homes, as it's done for millennia. But fire can also injure, kill, and destroy. Fire is without morals. There is no "good" or "bad" fire. It can be either helpful or destructive. Like fire, magick must be used with care.

Imagine a garage with concrete walls and floors. The floor is clean of debris. Imagine building a fire in this space, and imagine sparks flying. These sparks would land on the cold, clean, concrete floor without creating an unwanted blaze. Now, imagine if that room were packed with ancient newspapers, books, rotting furniture, and spots of oil or fuel. A single spark could create a fatal inferno. (This fire is a metaphor. By no means do I mean to imply that actual housefires are a curse or punishment on those who have lost their homes or lives. I only use the fire metaphor as it best reflects what I have seen magick do to practitioners if not used with care.) If spell-casting is the fire and the garage is the life of the practitioner, the flammable garbage is a history of unacknowledged or uncorrected hurtful actions. If we are not treating others or ourselves with integrity, magick will shine a big, unapologetic light on those areas of our lives.

Before I cast a spell, I take a good look at my life. Are there wrongs I need to right or situations I need to rectify? If so, I try to correct them. Am I taking good care of myself, getting enough sleep and good quality food, and surrounding myself with loving, supportive influences? Have I tried to be a good friend, spouse, sister and daughter, and neighbor? If I'm not sure, I make an effort to do so.

When we don't clean our proverbial concrete rooms, we set ourselves up to be consumed by our own spellwork. We may relive painful situations. Individuals we thought were long gone may reappear. Calamities may seize our personal lives until we address an old mistake. If we have not been diligent about rectifying our errors, those mistakes are bound to return and make our lives difficult. Some may call this karma, a term adopted from Hinduism and Buddhism, believing that the gods or the universe is punishing us for misdeeds. But this definition lacks the understanding of the

complex meaning of karma within its original context (something beyond the scope of this book), and doesn't serve the point. Misfortune following magick is not a punishment, only a reaction. Just as the metaphorical burning garage is not a punishment, the inferno is a reaction to the garage's neglect. Many believe they can circumvent these sorts of reactions by only casting "good spells": spells to bring about positive things, such as health or love. However, even if someone is casting a peace and happiness spell for every person on the planet, if the personal work is left undone, trouble will follow.

I've seen it happen. I knew a man who cast a spell to bring magick into his life. The spell was not meant to harm anyone, and he cast it with the simple intent to invoke meaning and beauty. A "good" spell, right? How could he get a bad reaction from such a kind, gentle intention? At first, the spell worked. He began having prophetic dreams and synchronistic conversations. When he wanted something, it manifested almost as soon as he thought of it. However, his metaphorical garage was filled with some highly flammable stuff. He had a serious girlfriend but was secretly seeing another woman. Soon after he cast his spell, his girlfriend found out about the duplicity and dumped him in a very public, embarrassing way. Then, his job literally "went to shit." A pipe burst in his workplace, flooding it with sewage, and his position was cut so the company could pay for the repairs. Then, he was hit by a van. He wasn't badly hurt, but the signal was clear. His life was full of lies, and they caught fire in the presence of magick. Magick came. But magick cleared his metaphoric garage, too.

That situation was extreme (but so was the man's garage!). I'm no saint. My own symbolic concrete room needs routine purging. Recently, I removed myself from planning an event because I knew my presence bothered one of the other organizers. A few years ago, I'd impeded on their work and was quite careless with their feelings. Although I'd offered apologies, my stepping aside demonstrated that I cared about the person's feelings, since my previous actions indicated that I didn't. I happily found another way to support the event while giving the person plenty of space to comfortably do their work.

Now, I say this with a caveat. If the landlord is threatening eviction, there won't be time to run around making amends to

everyone we've ever pissed off before casting a "Stay in My Home" spell. If I were to run a marathon (haha), I would want to train my body before the event. But if I were on the Oregon coast and a tsunami were on its way, I would need to run as fast as I could without worrying if I prepared myself properly for the run. Sometimes, we just have to do the magick.

Also, we're never going to be perfect. Recently, I confronted someone who badly hurt my feelings several years ago. She had no recollection of the event, which was aggravating, but also eye-opening. If she could have no memory of something I so clearly remembered, there are surely people to whom I probably owe amends and I'm oblivious to it. The best we can do, if we are to practice magick, is to routinely "clean house" and be willing to accept what comes if we miss a spot. We shouldn't avoid magick because we feel our garages aren't "clean enough," either. Magick offers blessings and wonderful opportunities to grow in life and spirit. We do ourselves and our deities a disservice if we avoid it for fear of being unworthy or having made too many past mistakes. We simply do the best we can and embrace both the blessings and uncomfortable lessons with grace . . . and humor.

Self-work is particularly important when involving the Morrigan. The Morrigan is a goddess that is primarily outside of this world, entering it through the faery caves, wind, and hail. She stands outside of partisanship, effecting change she deems for the greatest good. No offerings or devotions will sway the Morrigan to champion someone acting out of greed or malice, or to help someone who has the best intentions but hasn't yet cleaned up their own existence yet.

But the Morrigan is not just interested in us doing right by others. She is also interested in us doing right by us. Keeping crucial parts of ourselves locked away is an injury we inflict on our own selves. Refusing to explore the unexplored parts of self, perhaps due to fear of what we might find, is damaging to the soul. The Morrigan needs us to acknowledge and embrace our true identity. It may be a painful journey, to be sure, but it will result in us earning the gift we need for ourselves.

But how do we know what work needs to be done? We must ask the Morrigan.

MEDITATION WITH THE MORRIGAN: CLEARING THE SOUL

Take a comfortable position, preferably alone in a dark room. Allow thoughts to exit your mind as soon as they enter it, without following them or trying to chase them away. Acknowledge the sounds around you, and the physical sensations in your environment.

Allow yourself to visualize a swirl of black birds above you. As they circle closer, they begin to form the shape of a woman. As she materializes, you recognize her as one of the Morrigan sisters, or perhaps a combination of all of them.

When she has fully formed, ask her to remove whatever is holding you back from either personal growth or from doing effective spiritual work.

Envision the Morrigan releasing black birds from her open palms. They swarm over you, pecking at and removing things from your heart, soul, and innards.

The Morrigan will name each as they fly away (e.g., guilt, shame, resentment . . .).

When every item no longer serving you has been removed, envision your whole being as open to receiving the Morrigan's blessing where the birds feasted.

In conclusion, ask the Morrigan if you are ready to move forward with spellwork and if she would be willing to assist. Be open to her answer.

You may find that the meditation will take a different direction. The Morrigan may want to show you things beyond the meditation. Don't be concerned if you fall asleep during the work. I find that much of my deepest work occurs while sleeping in a meditation.

When the work concludes, offer thanks to the Morrigan through either prayer or an offering. Make note of any synchronicities you experience or revelations you receive in the days following the working.

PRAYERS TO THE MORRIGAN

Spells take a lot of effort, and often supplies. Prayers, on the other hand, need nothing in the way of supplies. Their true gift is helping seekers become closer with a deity. Prayers don't require metaphoric garage cleanup, nor do they require offerings. Through prayer, you may find guidance to better treat yourself or others, and the tasks to make that a reality become gifts very quickly. Whether you are new to the Morrigan, exploring the different sisters, or simply want to routinize your practice, the following prayers may be helpful.

Morning Prayer to Macha

The path of the day before me,
Yesterday's path behind,
I call on Macha as my guide
To walk beside me and help me find my way,
Carry me if I stumble, corral me if I go astray,
I see You, I hear You, I open myself to Your voice and wise
ways.

Midday Prayer to Morrigan

May I act with justice, may I act with strength,
Summon me to right action,
Show me where my enemies be,
Both in others and within me,
I ask for strength, for power, and fortitude,
To clear my obstacles and steer me home.

Nighttime Prayer to Badb

The Raven calling in the black of night,
I hear you and feel you with the greatest might,
Open my mind so that I might see your visions
Open my ears to hear the words
I listen for warnings, I listen for knowing
Call the web of dreams into my mind

So that I may see what I need to know.

A Prayer to Soothe Inner Strife

If you are feeling internal turmoil, this prayer can help you find your way through it.

Great Queens, beautiful and terrible,
Dancers on the edge of death,
I plead to you through showers of tears,
Take me in your cold, strong hands and raise me from
suffering and strife,
Let me not be sorrowful in your session hereafter.
You who know the darkness,
The fear, the blood, the despair,
Who sing the terrors sweetly, who laugh at nightmares,
Before the adders consume me and the warrior takes to
fight,
Release my wings of night,
So that I may fly with the Queens of Terror,
To laugh and frighten my demons to ash,
And rake through them with mine own raven claws.

A Prayer for Support during Trying Times

If you are undergoing a difficult time and crave gentler support from a sister, this prayer may be helpful. You could take it a step further and place a small horse figurine (possibly one you could wear on a necklace or around your wrist) in your sacred space and bless it with the following prayer:

Stay close to me, gentle Macha,
My enemies are loud and fierce,
Carry me, gentle mare,
Through the raging battle beside and inside me,
Gentle Macha, be with me.

Wear the charm during times of strife. When the difficult time has passed, consider passing the charm and the prayer along to someone else and encourage them to do the same when they are done. This will increase the charm's potency over time and ultimately bring more magick and connection to Macha back to you.

SPELLS WITH THE MORRIGAN

If you have a specific objective and would like to use magick with the help of the Morrigan, the following spells may prove helpful for your endeavors.

Spell to Summon Understanding in the Opposition

Whether it's a demanding parent or boss, a stuffy coworker or classmate, or a difficult landlord, this spell utilizes the powers of Macha to help elicit understanding from an opposing force—so that they might experience and understand the pressure they are putting on you.

What you'll need:

- A picture of a racing horse
- A red candle (for the blood of Macha)

Carve or write the name of the person you wish to receive the energy into the candle. Set the candle on the horse photo. If you can obtain horsehair, consider arranging it around the candle and photograph.

Light the candle and say the following aloud:

As the Goddess ran afield,
And the blood ran down Her legs,
So the pain of Her opposition was returned to its source
And so my pain returns to its origin
By Macha, with Macha, through Macha,
I've run my race and now it's done.
For those who have harmed me, their run is only begun.

When the candle has finished burning, discard the wax and carry the horse picture on your person (either in a pocket or shoe) whenever you know you'll be interacting with the person who is causing you stress.

Spell to Protect Someone You Love

Before beginning this spell, you will want to dedicate a blade to the Morrigan. It can be simple, such as a butter knife. I've found interesting, inexpensive cutlery and even ornate blades in thrift stores. Be mindful when selecting your blade. Don't choose one you plan to use later to cut your chicken dinner. A magick blade should stay as such. Avoid plastic cutlery if possible, but if you're in a pinch or if this is all you are able to acquire, it will be fine to use.

I don't recommend this as a general prayer of protection, such as "keep my children from general harm," as it's an energy-intensive working that requires seeing it through to the end of a specific conflict, such as support for a friend while they move out of an abusive home.

In your sacred space, steady and make yourself receptive to assistance. Light a candle to the Morrigan (dark purple or red, if you can; if not, any color will do).

Offer the following prayer:

Great Queens of battle and glory,
I seek assistance for [*name of person/s*]
Who are under siege by [*name of threat/s*].

If the person or people are of blood relation to you, prick your finger at this point. (Do not use menstrual blood, as doing so will cause the spell to become more focused on you than them.) Leave a drop on a piece of paper in your sacred space. Lay the blade upon the paper and say aloud:

I seek Your sacred blade to defend my blood kin.

If the person or people are not of blood relation to you (the Celts revered the foster bond as equal to or even more sacred than a blood relation—adopted kin, family by marriage, or close friends

will be held in equal regard by the Morrigan, and in some cases possibly greater regard), or if you feel uneasy about using blood in your rite, use a photo of your beloved or write their name(s) on a piece of paper and lay the blade across it.

Say aloud:

I seek Your sacred blade to defend my beloved kin.

With either option, complete the prayer as follows:

As the Great Queens did for Lugh, so I humbly ask the same for [name(s)].

Pursue what was watched,

Destroy what might be subdued,

Annihilate the threat against my kin.

While it's not always necessary to make an offering when casting a spell, this is one instance in which an offering is indeed a necessity. You'll want to visit your sacred space daily, relight the candle, and speak the prayer again. If possible, leave the blade and paper or picture in place. If you're not able to do so, bring it out and set it in place daily, lighting a candle and speaking the prayer. No need to prick your finger more than once unless the paper gets lost. Repeat this rite until the person or persons have reached a place of safety. Make a second offering to the Morrigan as a sign of thanks.

Spell to Find Your Way When No Option Seems Like a Good One

Badb is represented by a mysterious crone in *Togail Bruidne Dá Derga*, otherwise known as “The Destruction of Dá Derga's Hostel.” In this myth, High King Conaire Mór finds himself in a tricky situation when the mysterious crone arrives. She calls herself many names, but in this myth scholars have argued that she is most likely Badb.¹ She asks to be admitted, but it is after dark. The king has to choose between two geas (taboos)—refusing hospitality to someone or receiving a lone woman after nightfall. However, this is one more potential geas-breaking after a series of such acts, all of which

put Ireland at great risk. Perhaps because of the carelessness of his own choices, Badb and Macha, among others, have come to illustrate the hopeless situation he has come into.

Of course, the king could not have avoided everything that came to him, just as we are not responsible for everything that befalls us. However, in every situation in which we are stuck, it is helpful to examine what role we have played in our own dead end. Often, in doing so, we can see what is outside of our control and allow ourselves to let that go. By identifying what is within our control, we can make changes.

Take a mirror to your sacred space. Some magick practitioners have mirrors they use only for magick work. If you have such a mirror, great! If not, a simple handheld mirror will be fine, too. Keep the light dim in your sacred space while you do this work. Working by candlelight is optimal, if possible.

Watch your reflection in the mirror. As you do so, objectively list the events leading up to your stuck situation. Don't criticize yourself for what you've done or dwell on anger or blame others for what they have done. Simply list the events as you recall them, while looking at your reflection. When you can think of no more events, repeat the following words:

Swords to my left, spears to my right,
Slings before me, serpents behind me,
She who blesses and curses with a single breath,
Badb, speak to me. I am listening.²

Close your eyes, and with the mirror still in your hand, envision that it is now a window through which you see Badb standing outside. Open your mind to whatever images you may see. Observe Badb's movements. Listen for what she says. You may find your mind wandering. If it does, gently bring it back to the image of Badb through the window. You may not hear anything in the moment. You may even fall asleep. If this happens, you may hear the message just as you wake.

It's common to not see or hear anything in the moment. It's also common to receive a cryptic message. This is not a failure. Badb may not yet be ready to show you the message, or you may need to

be in a different place to hear or understand it. Take note of your dreams over the next three days and pay attention to synchronicity. Frequently, the message will be clear in retrospect.

Spell to Provide

This blessing spell is designed to be done in your kitchen. If you don't have a conventional kitchen, you can bless the space where you eat. You can even bless your microwave or hot plate if you don't have a hearth or an oven.

If you have a candle that you typically burn when making offerings to the Morrigan, take this candle to your cooking or eating space. If you live in a building that does not allow open flame, a battery-operated candle is a fine substitute. Light this candle in the space where you cook or eat and say the following incantation:

By the light of the Morrigan's flame,
This space is Her cooking hearth, but She is also my
welcome guest.
May this space nourish, nurture, sustain,
May those who eat here be well and fulfilled,
In the Morrigan's name . . .
So be it.

Spell to Subdue Competition

This Macha spell can turn competitors into coconspirators. It will also help stop gossip or keep others from having power over you.

What you'll need:

- A picture of your competition or their name(s) written on a piece of paper.

In your sacred space, hold on to the picture or paper and say the following incantation:

Macha, wise and feared queen,
As you tricked the sons of Dithorba,

Now trick [*name of competition*].
Sway them to my cause,
Let them build the fortress of my [*name of your endeavor*].
May the work be strong, may it be good, may it triumph.

Fold the photo or paper and stick it in your shoe. Wear it when you are around the competition. If you will not be in the same physical space as your competition, do this for at least three days. Do it for three weeks or three months if the competition is particularly fierce.³

Spell to Avoid Being Seen

Maybe you have a fantastic idea for a novel you want to keep secret for now. Maybe you're planning a surprise party for a clever friend. Maybe you want to exit a relationship and aren't ready for your significant other to know.

What you'll need:

- A piece of fabric, either black or camouflage
- A cow or bull figurine

In your sacred space, hold the cow figurine in your hand and focus on what you wish to keep hidden. Recite the following until you feel the figurine throb in your hands:

My [*what you wish to hide*] be my cattle.

The Morrigan knows the way . . .

When you feel the figurine throb, wrap it in the fabric and hide it in a place not likely to draw attention, such as a potted plant. (I don't recommend putting it under a bed or in a sock drawer, as it may get kicked around or pulled out by accident. "Accidental discovery," even when you're the one who accidentally discovers the vessel, will undermine the secrecy of the spell.) When your work is complete, remove and unwrap the cattle figurine. Consider making a second offering to the Morrigan, particularly if the spell has gone on for a while!

Spell to Charm a Wealth Trinket

If your country's currency produces gold-colored coins, take three and sew or glue them into a red pouch along with a written inscription:

As the Morrigan was good to Tulchine, may the Morrigan
be good to me.

Carry this pouch with you in a purse or pocket. Periodically (every three weeks initially, and then every three months should be fine), bring the pouch to your sacred space and ask the Morrigan for continued blessing on your wealth and prosperity. Be sure to make an offering whenever you do so.

Spell to Be Heard

If people are not listening to you, take a piece of yarn or other cotton-based cord and wear it loosely around your neck beneath your clothing for five days. If it becomes visible and you are asked about it, say that it is for good luck or that your nephew made it for you to wear. Don't divulge its true purpose.

After five days, take the cord to your sacred space or to a riverside and say the following words:

It is none the better for those who shout over me,
Than who shake their words over my head.
The gray wolf, the eel, and the Great Queens beside me,
The noose shall be at the feet of those who drown me out.
Their ears shall open, my voice shall soar,
In service of the Great Queens, the truth shall prevail
through me.

Slice the cord and bury it in a physical location close to whoever tends to drown you out. If the person is not physically near you, bind a picture of them with the cord. Burn both the cord and picture, and blow the ashes outdoors toward the direction in which they live.

Spell to Cause Confusion

Organization is a key to success. Throughout your journey, you may find that creating confusion for your opposition may be helpful. When a white nationalist group began organizing in my hometown, I found the following spell to be helpful.

Collect as many feathers as you can. Black feathers are best. Please note that laws may prohibit collecting certain bird feathers. If you are unable to collect a sufficient number of feathers, it is fine to purchase them from a craft store.

In your sacred space, arrange the feathers into the name of the persons or group onto which you'd like to sow confusion and discord. Envision different kinds of confusion entering the group—miscommunication in conversation, missed emails, conflicting agendas, etc.

Begin to chant, “Morrigu, Badb, Macha . . . Morrigu, Badb, Macha,” while envisioning the confusion you wish to create. When you feel the presence of the sisters, let out as piercing and loud of a scream as you are able. If you live in a place where this is not feasible, scream inside your head.

Mash the feathers together and roll them around until they are fractured and frayed. If these are natural feathers, scatter them to the wind and let the breeze carry them away. If these are not natural feathers, dispose of them in the garbage can. (Craft store feathers often have plastic centers. Don't leave plastic in a natural area.) If the garbage can is in your home, immediately take the contents to the dumpster.

Morrigan Prophecy Oil

While the Morrigan does not have a specific connection to the moon, I recommend making this one on a full moon. A full moon brings light into darkness, which is essentially what prophecy does—it illuminates the unknown. This oil is particularly connected to Badb, but it can be used to invoke any of the Morrigan sisters.

Add equal parts of essential cinnamon oil, sandalwood oil, and wormwood oil to a neutral base oil, such as jojoba or mineral oil. A suggestion might be three drops of each into 1/3 cup of base oil. You may add more to suit your preferred fragrance, but be sure to add equal parts of each.

Note: These oils can be expensive. If you are unable to purchase them, using powdered cinnamon and the ash from sandalwood or wormwood incense is a reasonable substitute.

*Do not apply undiluted essential oils directly onto your skin—particularly cinnamon oil, which will burn. Consider using gloves when mixing your oil. Do not ingest the essential or mixed oils.*⁴

While mixing this oil, chant the following:

Red Badb, speak your stories . . .

Red Badb, speak your stories . . .

Before using the oil, anoint a red candle with the oil and light it in honor of Badb. Anoint the center of your forehead (third eye) or use other divination tools such as tarot cards, a teacup for tea readings, crystals, or scrying mirrors. Touch oil on your temples before bedtime to induce prophetic dreams.

Spell for Healing

I have seen the gods heal. That is, I've seen miracles happen. But what I've more commonly seen is the gods opening pathways toward healing, helping us find ways to heal ourselves. Some people find that their specialist suddenly offers them a new treatment. Others have received apologies from former lovers. No healing is immediate, but working with the gods can help it along. This rite is based on the healing the Morrigan provided for Cú Chulainn in the *Táin*.

Bring a glass of milk to your sacred space (almond or soy is a fine substitute if you cannot or do not consume cow milk). While holding the milk in your hands, close your eyes and reflect on the nature of the harm or injury. Remember the moment when it happened as though you were reliving it.

Allow yourself to see the white-haired crone of the Morrigan standing beside you when the injury took place. In this space, ask the Morrigan for the healing you need.

When you are ready, open your eyes and drink the milk. Give thanks and an offering for the working the Morrigan has done for you.

Spell to Know What the Other Side Is Doing

This spell also involves an offering of service.

As mentioned, one of the Morrigan's lesser known but more powerful attributes is that of espionage. If your success is dependent on having foreknowledge of what your opposition is up to, this rite may be helpful.

Take a golden coin of your local currency and tie it to a natural black feather with a cotton string or strip of natural fabric. (Note: Using cotton or a natural fiber is key here. You'll be leaving this to the elements, so leaving plastic or unnatural materials that would be dangerous to the environment or to animals is undesirable.) Leave the coin and feather at the base of a tree growing beside a moving body of water. Again, a river is best, but a creek or other source of moving water will do. Be ready to offer an act of service in exchange for the information.

Speak the following to the running water:

Tethra's wife, that is Badb, the Fomorian wife who is
Morrighu,

I offer [*what service you promise to deliver*] so that I might
know the secrets of [*name of opposition*].

She the scald crow, the brooding fury, this sight I seek

To further my cause, for I stand in righteous steps.

This knowledge will likely come to you via dreams or intuition. You may find that someone with inside knowledge shares something helpful. It's vital to trust your instincts and intuition in the wake of this rite. Be sure you begin to keep your portion of the bargain before the information materializes.

Spell to Court the Morrigan's Favor to Your Cause

In the famous myth of the “tryst” between the Dagda and the Morrigan, the Dagda approaches the Morrigan at the river and after they “unite,” she gives him pertinent information on defeating his enemy—and even vows to aid in the battle, too. For this spell, location is key. You may need to travel!

This working must be done at a natural riverside, preferably one

in the country. If you live in a city and want to use a river that crosses through your town, try to find a place where trees are plentiful. No matter what, do this working safely. It is perfectly fine (and even encouraged!) to bring a friend along.

Be prepared to offer your service to the Morrigan. While the tryst myth suggests that the Morrigan and the Dagda copulated, the original text is translated as “they united.” Be willing to enter a union with the Morrigan yourself, offering your service to a cause that might please the sisters. Maybe you'll tidy up a graveyard for veterans. Maybe you'll collect donations for a bird sanctuary. Perhaps you'll feed crows every day for a month. Offer something that will take some effort (something too easy is not a gift) but is also feasible, so you don't find yourself breaking your word.

Approach the riverside humbly. If it is safe to do so, wash your hands, head, and abdomen with the river water. (Again, safety is key. Do not put yourself in physical danger for a spell.) At the river, declare your intention:

Great Queen of the Battle, She who strides across the great river,

I kneel in Your presence, I honor Your power, grace, and beauty,

I humbly ask for Your aid in defeating [*name of opposition*].

[Here, describe the opposition and why your victory is the just cause.]

In return for your gracious, blessed work, I offer my [*offer your pledge of assistance*].

With gratitude to the Great Queen, I ask this for myself.

Be aware that you may find synchronicity nudging you in a different direction when it comes to doing the service work. If the tides change in your favor, be sure to make an offering of thanks in your sacred space or another act of service. If the tides do not shift in your favor, you may want to seek divination to see if the Morrigan needs more work from you or if she sided with your opposition in this case. If it's the latter, consider it an opportunity for growth and seek to discover (through meditation,

synchronicity, or other divination) why your side was not chosen this time around.

A FEW MORE NOTES ABOUT SPELLS

Casting magick spells is a creative process, not a prescriptive one. Not only should you feel free to change elements of the spells above, but if you feel called to do so, it's imperative that you follow through on that nudge.

However, here is one prescription:

Do not demand things from the Morrigan sisters. In some spiritual or magickal traditions, such as working with many of the Catholic saints, “bossing the spirit around” is an expected part of the working. This is not the case with the Morrigan. Go into the work with deep respect, but not fear. Be open to a different outcome from what you originally desired. Trust the Morrigan's process. Be prepared, particularly in spells involving competition, that the Morrigan may find just cause on both sides and help both of you, or may even help only the other side, which may seem confusing at first. You might have to do some cleanup work before your cause is just in the Morrigan's eyes.

Lastly, and I cannot stress this part enough, magick is a process. Many new spell-casters struggle with this, wondering why things didn't work when they “did what the spell said to do.” Magick is something you invest in, cultivate, and receive with gratitude. Be patient, receptive, and grateful, remembering to keep your end of any bargain you strike with the gods, even if you're not sure they're fulfilling their part of it. And remember, regarding the “cleaning your garage” suggestion: no one is ever going to be perfectly ready when they begin. Start before you are ready, and simply move forward. The gods look fondly on those who try their best. They appreciate integrity, but don't require perfection (or so I personally hope, anyway!).

Let the spell-casting be part of the journey. Do it with joy.

Bare Branches, Black Birds

Bare-branched trees in the winter are one of my favorite things to look at. I love to lie under their threaded shadows. The crows like them too, seeming to prefer them to the pines that stay green year-round. When they begin to flower and leaf in the spring, they always seem to be more beautiful than they were the year before. People like to think they come back the same, but I don't think so. I think they come back, if not objectively more beautiful, definitely stronger.

I devoted myself to the Morrigan a couple years ago. At the time, I was a confused young woman. Now, I am a (granted, still confused) budding young man. I questioned my gender for a year and a half because I knew what being a trans man would mean for my life and my marriage. I resisted my identity. The Morrigan does not temper resisting identity for long. Time and time again, during my pathworking, she would destroy my body, sometimes with fire, sometimes with wolves and crows consuming my flesh. She was destroying my perception of myself, which was built from others' perceptions of me, society's perceptions. It was often painful, and I came out of those trances exhausted, but feeling lighter.

Yes, I am a trans man; but more importantly, I am me. I sacrificed who I was for my marriage, my family, society, comfort. My branches are bare right now, and the cold wind hurts, but sometimes, at just the right time of sunset, orange light fills my branches. I become illuminated, filled with the strength and beauty and love of my goddess, and just for those few minutes I am able to see; I will come back stronger.

J. Newell

CONCLUSION



"Morrigan" by Tamara Sulc

A few days after I'd sat in the Morrigan's cave, my husband and I drove through the Doolough Valley in County Mayo. It was our last full day in Ireland. We stopped the car and got out, as the place was too beautiful to see only through a window. The cliffs and gentle river below were a kind of beauty so intense I wanted to melt where I stood and become part of it forever. I felt powerfully insignificant. If that had been my last moment on earth, I would have been satisfied.

I wandered over to a stone cross to read its plaque and realized it was a famine memorial. It described an incident a hundred and fifty years earlier when, in the thick of the Great Famine, hundreds of starving people walked through that valley on a cold night, hoping to receive aid in a nearby town. When they were turned

away, many died, some with green mouths from eating grass.

The contradiction hurt. A moment before, I'd wanted to be in that valley forever. Now, I wanted to burn it all and kick the ashes into the river. I loved it. I hated it. I wanted to embrace it and soothe its sorrows. I wanted to lock it away in selective amnesia and pretend I'd never been there. Ireland is full of such contradictions, and so is the Morrigan.

The Morrigan is both beautiful and terrible. She incites a desire to embrace her and to be devoured by her, but she also inspires terror enough to flee from her. Yet just as I wanted to both embrace and destroy the valley, I also knew it was not to blame for the tragedy it held. It wasn't even responsible for its own beauty. But it held both: the glorious and the horrific, as it had for centuries . . . maybe millennia. In that valley, I understood the great paradox of the Morrigan in a way that no book, myth, meditation, or lit candle ever could have imparted. The Morrigan is not always the source of terror or beauty, although she holds both. It is in this ability to hold both, where the pain and ecstasy of life meet, that can comfort and drive a person to madness.

But what did this mean for me? How could a goddess of paradox be a spiritual support? My life needed answers and solutions. The Morrigan had provided comfort but also more questions, and nothing concrete had changed in my life since I'd invited her into it. I was grateful for what I'd learned, but thought that maybe she wasn't the goddess for me. Maybe she wasn't a goddess for anyone—too aloof, too complicated, too otherworldly to truly accompany these human lives of ours. Maybe that is the great tragedy of the Morrigan, at least for our sake.

But soon after we returned from Ireland, I dreamed of a screaming woman. It was a death herald, I knew, but the Badb in the dream was me, howling over some nameless injustice: "It's not right! It's not right!" was all I could remember of the dream. The next morning, I received bad news.

He had been an important friend. We did every play together in high school. He took me to the prom. We dated, he broke my heart, and in trying to remain friends after breaking up, we had a falling out and didn't speak for years. We both ended up in New York City, two Oregon kids trying to make sense of a city. We probably needed each other, but I limited our connection to a beer

every few years. He wanted to let the past go and embrace me as his old buddy, but I kept a cold distance, thinking I “owed it” to my younger self to hold the grudge. Just before I began this Morrigan journey (after we were both married and I was back in Oregon), something told me to open a conversation about the events that drove us apart. I felt a little silly revisiting a chapter closed twenty years before, but he was kind and receptive. We both apologized, putting old rifts to rest. We promised to get together, with our spouses and his kids, on their next trip out west. A hole in my heart healed, one I didn't even know I had. My old friend was back.

Death is rarely easy, but there are some deaths that make you want to punch holes in walls, like the death of a young person who left behind a loving partner and two small children. When you get word about a death like that, as I did, you question everything—particularly the gods. The day after the screaming dream, not even a year since we'd reconciled as friends, I learned he'd died during cancer treatment at thirty-eight years old.

I was enraged: angry at myself for holding the grudge, angry at cancer, angry at the fact that his babies wouldn't know their daddy. I was angry at him for not telling me he was sick, even angry that “he'd become a good person,” because it would have been easier to lose someone I still hated. But I was also full of a strange type of joy that partners with grief—the joy of simply having known a person and for me, in having reconciled with him, of having listened to the voice inside that had said, *Talk to him. Now.*

Not long after that, my husband and I finally achieved a pregnancy but lost it at seven weeks. This too meant complicated feelings: a mix of joy in having gotten pregnant in the first place, and sorrow in having lost it. I felt angry and betrayed by my body, but also in awe and appreciation for what it had created and then destroyed when it knew things weren't quite right, all on its own. I was sick, in pain, grieving for our lost child, but also experiencing an unexpected awe at the simplicity and efficiency of the death goddess.

Afterward, I sat with the paradoxical feelings of both losses. Such a strange ball of grief had no natural slots in my soul where I could let it sit and heal. I wondered if the warnings were right.

Had the Morrigan brought calamity into my life? Was she the cause of my suffering?

When I was trying to understand, I sat in my messy office at the tiny altar I'd created for the Morrigan, just as I had sat in Owynagat. I asked my questions aloud, only to realize how ridiculous they were. The sisters had not brought destruction into my life, but they showed me how to walk through it. When I poured that whiskey at that shrine in Washington state at the start of this journey, I thought my soul was wading through a deep river. I had no idea I was approaching a time even deeper and harder. The sisters were there, waiting—not for my devotion, or even this book, but to mark the ford where I could cross it safely.

I didn't feel like I had to assuage my anger or heal my sorrow. I could simply sit with the losses and the feelings around them. The Morrigan held them, just as her cave had held my tears: quiet and still, but ever present. Instead of fighting the paradox, through the Morrigan I accepted it. And when I accepted it, I found peace.

My friend will always be with me in spirit, and my husband and I are ready to try for another baby. When I have moments of fear, either of losing another friend or another baby, I draw on the first lesson I learned from this goddess: acknowledge the fear, and proceed anyway.

There is a lot of caution around the Morrigan. The sisters, like any deities, might disrupt our lives. But as I've hopefully shared within this book, that's not automatically a bad thing. When we seek spirit, are we only hoping to affirm what we already know and believe? Or are we looking to manifest a stronger life? If it's the former, the Morrigan may not be for you. If it's the latter, you've come to the right place.

Still, a few words of advice are helpful. Melody Legaspi-Seils said, "If you feel the Morrigan, just give her a little space to talk. She's looking at you because there's something about you that she needs in her wheelhouse. She doesn't want 100 percent of your time." Karen Ward suggested that if you feel the Morrigan calling, ask yourself what in your life is coming to an end—and if there is a new door that needs opening. Treasa Kerrigan said to remind the goddess that you are human, as the Morrigan doesn't understand what it means to be physically exhausted, starving, or at the end of your tether: "It's not an evilness or a nastiness," Treasa says. "The

gods just don't understand, so you will need to be clear on how far you're prepared to go in your devotion." Megan Flanagan Henslee encourages would-be Morrigan devotees to be ready for truth, extreme change, and growth. Edmund pointed out that deities often respond to us in the way that we invoke them: "It's probably not a good idea to invoke her common public image of madness, destruction, and decomposition. If you do, you'd better be strong and you'd better be lucky. She has other aspects associated with love, protection, and sovereignty, as well as war. Love and war goddesses are essentially goddesses of empowerment, and empowerment that is about engaging with humanity rather than withdrawing from it."

My suggestion is to be open to how the Morrigan's manifestations take place. Although I organized this book around the Morrigan's different aspects, I don't think it's possible to invite one without the others. You can do a ritual to better know the Morrigan as the shape-shifter, but she will bring along every other aspect as well. There is no embracing the Morrigan as healer without also experiencing the death omen. It's not possible to bring in the warrior without also experiencing the faery. There is a gift in all of it.

Humanity's future is scary. We don't know what our world will look like in twenty years. But tough times call for tough goddesses. Many of the things that will happen to us may be out of our control. The Morrigan is a goddess of many things, but perhaps the greatest one is that of navigating the darkness, and acknowledging our fears and proceeding anyway. Because she walks in the liminal places, she can accompany us through these difficult transitions. The sisters may not solve things for us, but we will not be alone while we try to solve them, ourselves.

To better know the Morrigan, be patient. Be humble. Be open-minded. Be in joy. There is beauty on the other side of our terror. There is even something beautiful within fear itself. The Morrigan holds it all. If you were called to read this book, she wants to hold it for you, too.

Thank you for reading. Blessed be your journey.

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2. Peter Narváez, *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, (Lexington, KY: Garland Publishing, 1997), 202.
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9. Kinsella, *The Táin*, 98.

10. Kinsella, *The Táin*, 132–133.

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8. Ó hÓgáin, *The Lore of Ireland*, 326.
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16. Epstein, “War Goddess,” 85.
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19. Herbert, “Transmutations of an Irish Goddess,” 149–150.

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2. “She who blesses and curses with a single breath” is a quote by Mayra Canas and is used with courtesy and gratitude.
3. The action of this spell, putting the names in your shoe, is a working I learned from friends in the Espiritismo and Hoodoo communities.

4. For more information on mixing or using oils, please see *Magical Oils by Moonlight* by Maya Heath.

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